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Embodiment and Allegory in 'Piers Plowman'

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Embodiment and Allegory in 'Piers Plowman'

Beatrice Wilford

PhD Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Langland's bodies are of fundamental importance to his allegory. Langland sees the body as the principle vehicle through which the words and ideas in his poem can be explored. He understands language as deeply embodied. *Piers Plowman* establishes a hermeneutics of flesh in which concepts are explored through their effects on bodies. The apparent opposition in *Piers*'s allegory between the material and the abstract is a result of Langland's belief in the importance of the body and the influence it has on meaning.

Ultimately, the body represents union with God through the incarnation and so understanding and using its insights is paramount. The first chapter explores representations of the body and the soul, the incarnation, and the relationship between personifications and words to establish how the poem theorises the interaction of flesh with matter. The second chapter argues that clothing and signs on the body are rejected as ways of displaying meaning by Langland in favour of depictions of meaning upon the bodies of personifications and other characters. The third chapter describes the 'capture' of bodies by meaning as a violent process endemic to allegory that Langland openly explores as a way of understanding how bodies interact with the conceptual. In the final chapter, the idea of Langland as a poet concerned with the bodily is examined through metaphor theory. *Piers* emerges as a poem that uses its reader's own body as a basis for its complex ideas, thus establishing a physical link between Langland

and his readers. This thesis finds, in Langland, a poet who believes the body should be at the centre of textuality and who uses allegory to open up and explore the intersections between bodies and words.

Introduction

Langland's allegory presents its readers with a clear problem. Within it he frequently and insistently describes a physical world of such intense and surprising detail that whatever abstract meaning it is supposed to convey becomes engulfed by the contemporary world he evokes – allegory breaks down.¹ Readers of the poem have sought to address the issue by claiming alternately that Langland achieves new levels of linguistic and allegorical density in his moments of 'realism';² that he momentarily puts allegory's transcendence aside and uses his text instead to comment on the material conditions of his times;³ that allegory's abstract nature cannot convey lived

¹ See Helen Cooper, 'Langland's and Chaucer's Prologues', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 1 (1987), 71-81, 'it has a persuasive and disturbing habit of turning literal: an index of Langland's crucial and central concern with the given world, the world as it is' (p. 72); A. C. Spearing writes that Langland's allegory: 'is at once earthy and dreamlike', *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 222.

² See Mary Clemente Davlin O. P., *A Game of Heuene: Word Play and the Meaning of 'Piers Plowman' B* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1989), Davlin sees the poem's complexity and incompleteness as representative of the world and the experience of interpretation is, for her, mimetic of the experience of searching for God; Jill Mann, 'Langland and Allegory', in *The Morton W. Bloomfield Lectures, 1989-2005*, ed. by Daniel Donoghue, James Simpson, and Nicholas Watson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), pp. 20-41 (p. 39); James Simpson, 'The Transformation of Meaning: A Figure of Thought in *Piers Plowman*', *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 37 (1986), 161-83, Simpson sees Langland as a satirist who mocks attempts to eclipse the spiritual with the material by mimicking them – his allegory gains meaning through the juxtaposition of the two; Rosemary Woolf, 'Some Non-Medieval Qualities of *Piers Plowman*', *Essays in Criticism*, 12 (1962), 111-125, Woolf sees the literary level of the allegory as incomplete, but sees 'visionary' moments in the poem where observations of the 'real' world lead to greater abstract significance (p. 123).

³ See David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1980), Aers reads Langland's depiction of the socio-political troubles of his day as so assured that he can only return to the transcendent through a deliberate 'withdrawal' from them (p. 67); for early uses of the poem as a guide to our knowledge of medieval social practices and satire (largely before it was understood as an allegory) see Anne Middleton, 'Introduction: The Critical Heritage', in *A Companion to 'Piers Plowman'*, ed. by John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 1-25 (pp. 3-6, 8-10).

experience and so ceases to function here;⁴ that allegory signals how the transcendent is not visible in human experience or language;⁵ and that

allegory's language (and by extension, all language) cannot express meaning.⁶

In this thesis, I will argue that Langland's allegory is physical. The realism of *Piers Plowman's* allegory means the poem is fundamentally an exploration of the effect of language on the human body. I propose that allegory's unification of material vehicle and abstract tenor allows Langland to open a unique space in

⁴ See Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith, 'Nede ne hath no lawe': Poverty and the De-stabilization of Allegory in the Final Visions of *Piers Plowman*, in *William Langland's 'Piers Plowman': a Book of Essays*, ed. by Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 233-253; 'Allegory on the Half-Acre: The Demands of History', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 10 (1996), 1-22.

⁵ See Priscilla Jenkins, 'Conscience: The Frustration of Allegory', in *'Piers Plowman': Critical Approaches*, ed. by S. S. Hussey (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 125-142, Jenkins argues that the poem depicts idealised readings struggling to apply themselves to a fully-realised social scene, Langland desires transcendence here, but shows it repeatedly failing to materialise; A. C. Spearing sees Langland's temporal specificity as a move against 'monumentalism' that suggests instead that transcendence 'can only be gained by an escape from language itself' (*Readings*, pp. 243-44); Madeleine Kasten uses Walter Benjamin's concepts of allegory as indicative of the fact that ideas will only ever be incompletely manifested in phenomena as a way of understanding Will's search for knowledge outside his 'kynde knowynge', *In Search of 'Kynde Knowynge': 'Piers Plowman' and the Origin of Allegory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); such readings are usefully summarised (and roundly condemned) by Pamela Raabe in the introduction to her *Imitating God: The Allegory of Faith in 'Piers Plowman' B* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp. 1-26 (pp. 1-5).

⁶ See Laurie A. Finke, 'Truth's Treasure: Allegory and Meaning in *Piers Plowman*', in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. by Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 51-68, for a reading that focusses on the failure of Langland's allegory to form a link between meaning and the material in his poem. She writes of *Piers*, that it 'at times, seems almost an allegory of the impossibility of discovering either significance or truth within language, whether one searches for divine or merely for human significance' (p. 57). For the theoretical basis of such assertions see J. Hillis Miller, 'The Two Allegories', in *Allegory, Myth and Symbol*, ed. by Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 355-370, 'In allegory naked matter shines through [...] as the failure of the idea to transform nature or thought' (p. 365); Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), where he writes that allegories are 'always allegories of the impossibility of reading' (p. 205); Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), for Benjamin allegories do not remain immanent expressions of universals but instead are empty monuments to beliefs once held and so eventually: 'what is sensibly apparent is not the idea, but the absence of the idea' (pp. 177-178).

his poem in which the body can be understood as discursively constituted. He examines bodies in relation to words as he is interested in how physicality can teach humans to become closer to God – and he wants to establish whether language can enable or reflect such a process. In a move away from theories that examine allegory in the poem through grammar, or describe it as failing (like language) to either represent the world or the transcendent, I look at how it frames a body that clearly obsesses Langland. I connect the allegorical structure of the text to the bodies that appear repeatedly within it, arguing that Langland uses this body within his form to think through the words and ideas that he uses.

Embodiment specifically interacts with the semantic purposes of allegory in *Piers* because – at an instinctive creative level – Langland is deeply concerned with the experiences people have with their own bodies and with how they could draw meaning from the shocking realities of flesh. The body forms, for Langland, one part of an allegorical dialectic in which words and ideas can be parsed through its varied functions. Personification presents a more overt means through which language can attach itself to people than abstract adjectives attached to realistic characters.⁷ Chaucer, for example, presents the varied natures of the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* as aspects of their

⁷ Mann argues that personification has 'an ambivalent quality which an imaginative writer – such as Langland – can use for complex effects, by playing off against each other the two roles of the noun, its role as generalizing abstraction, and its role as the name of an individual' ('Allegory', p. 21).

identities in portraits leading to pictures of densely realised social individuals.⁸ In each case, ideas connected to dress, physiognomy, behaviour, mount, origin, sexuality, or skin coalesce around the figure of a naturalistic character. Every aspect of a character's presentation, such as the Wife of Bath's clothing or the Summoner's skin, is legible as part of a realistic identity.⁹ In personification allegory, conversely, a word is reduced to expression by a singular individual and the particulars of his or her narrative.¹⁰ Rather than expressions of an abstract noun, the person becomes the noun in monolithic form. This means that all aspects of the character's description and all of their actions are enjoined

⁸ See Mary Clemente Davlin, 'God and the Human Body in *Piers Plowman*', *The Chaucer Review*, 46 (2011), 147-165. Davlin highlights the fragmented nature of Langland's descriptions of bodies, she compares this to Chaucer's *descriptio* as noted by Jill Mann: 'long and detailed portraits [...] which anatomized a character's personal appearance from head to toe' (Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 843, cited by Davlin, p. 149); C. David Benson, 'Piers Plowman and Parish Wall Paintings,' *YLS* 11 (1997), 1-38, argues that the untethered bodies in *Piers* resemble those found on church walls – but concedes some are unpaintable (pp. 27-32).

⁹ See Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the 'General Prologue' to the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 'Chaucer forces us to feel we are dealing with real people because we cannot apply to them the absolute responses appropriate to the abstractions of moralistic satire' (pp. 188), see also pp. 208-12 for a description of how Langland's delineation of estates in the Prologue of *Piers* could have influenced Chaucer's 'General Prologue'. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1987), ll. 1.470-73, 1.624-633. All further quotations of Chaucer's works are from this edition and will be cited by fragment and line number in the text.

¹⁰ Morton Bloomfield describes the linguistic strategies involved in personification allegory – delineating how the development of a noun from a polysemous inanimate noun into a unisemous animate (also a deictic or pointer) noun reduces the word's meaning from generality to instance; conversely, the predicates used by the poet in relation to the noun introduce new, ungrammatical and exciting meanings to the word. Morton W. Bloomfield, 'A Grammatical Approach to Personification Allegory', *Modern Philology*, 60 (1963), 161-71 (pp. 164-65).

to the elucidation of this term.¹¹ The reader is alert, therefore, to the manifold ways in which the person represented expresses the word – any aspects of characterisation which are socially legible or naturalistic, which, in short, resemble the Chaucerian model, must be parsed through this extra reading.¹² Bodies and words in personification allegory are therefore engaged in intense and overt acts of mediation. As a result, the reader becomes sensitive to the ways in which language and embodiment interact to illuminate and frustrate each others' meaning.

Langland's personifications represent words through long discourses, dress, pain, genealogy, marriage, force.¹³ In each case, the reader does not adduce facets of their presentation to a singular character but to the expression of a single word. Physicality and semantics are in a state of constant suspension as a result of this. Each aspect of the personification's presentation that coheres (or not) with the word whose meaning they carry encourages interpretation that is at once aware of their body and the word. Jill Mann writes that Langland's 'mixed mode of allegory' makes it:

impossible to distinguish [...] between a material world which

¹¹ Robert Worth Frank argues that interpretation of a personification in allegory should consist first of the acceptance of its name as literal, second of interrogation of its predicate to discover its other meanings in the text. For example: 'Dame Study is introduced as Wit's wife. This relationship of the characters *really* means something else: that the activity of study is closely related to the faculty of wit' (Robert Worth Frank, Jr., 'The Art of Reading Medieval Personification Allegory', *English Literary History*, 20 (1953), 237-250, p. 245). Bloomfield and Mann build in this insight (see notes 7 and 8, above).

¹² See Cooper, 'Prologues', for a discussion of the similarities between the prologues of *Piers* and *The Canterbury Tales* where she argues that *Piers* unifies the characters it presents into a moral ideal while Chaucer's types set the stage for his heterogeneous tales.

¹³ In order, these personifications are: Holy Church, Conscience, and Reason; Pride; Sloth (in passus 22); Meed; Elde and Hunger.

constitutes the vehicle of the allegorical metaphor, and the spiritual world which constitutes its meaning. Instead, Langland makes us constantly aware of the way in which life is lived at the intersection of the material and the non-material, the concrete and the abstract. His allegory does not 'layer' concrete and abstract, fictional action and meaning, but shows them as different facets of the same multi-angled reality.¹⁴

I argue in this thesis that this mixed mode shows a poet consistently aware of the body interacting with abstract ideas – with words and discourses – that seem inappropriate to its materiality. I think Langland is caught between an imaginative sensibility that consistently returns to embodied experience and a need to explain and discuss material phenomena in the poetic terms he has set himself. As Mann shows, he makes his allegory an apposite foundation for this project: it stages the meeting of the material with the abstract. Langland's understanding of the body works against his uses of allegory to make his most effective and shocking figures. He wants to describe the body accurately, as it is insistently the foundation – for him – of an experience that ends with God. Where language opposes this desire, Langland uses the looseness of his allegorical form to explore how the body resists language. In doing so, he writes his most effective poetry and establishes a deeply affective theology in which the struggle to speak of God in human language is directly linked to the struggle to express one's own embodiment within it. In moments where

¹⁴ Mann, 'Allegory', p. 30.

language can be viewed as actively constraining, resisting, or failing to recognise the full import of the physical, the poem is able to create ideas of embodiment outside its constraining force.

Discussions of the body and allegory in *Piers Plowman* have largely understood personifications to be strangely disembodied and purely literary or have read personification's bodies through what their gender tells us about the poem's attitudes to sex, meaning, and gendered identity.¹⁵ Middle English's non-gendered nouns allow the poem's personifications to adopt fluid identities and this has raised questions concerning its depiction of women,¹⁶ its understanding of gender norms,¹⁷ and the possibility for a disruptive queerness to emerge where the poem juxtaposes its male personifications and a male dreamer.¹⁸ In my discussion of the body in the poem I do not focus on gender

¹⁵ See Lavinia Griffiths, *Personification in 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985), Griffiths understands the poem's personifications according to Roland Barthes's definition of literary characters – arguing that they 'have no body or biography at all' (p. 5).

¹⁶ Helen Cooper sees the poem as largely embedded in patriarchal gender norms in which male action predominates. She sees the personifications as metonymic – they represent aspects of the dreaming Will and therefore will naturally be male. She suggests they have no 'corporeal substance' and yet identifies the similarity of each to Will through their bodily appearance, and dwells on the actions of personifications, their sexual activities and familial ties in the poem, 'Gender and Personification in *Piers Plowman*', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 5 (1991), 31–48 (p. 42).

¹⁷ Colette Murphy, 'Lady Holy Church and Meed the Maid: Re-envisioning Female Personifications in *Piers Plowman*', in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, ed. by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 140–64.

¹⁸ See James J. Paxson, 'Inventing the Subject and Personification of Will in *Piers Plowman*: Rhetorical, Erotic and Ideological Origins and Limits in Langland's Allegorical Poetics', in *William Langland's Piers Plowman*, pp. 195–231; 'The Personificational Face: *Piers Plowman* Rethought Through Levinas and Bronowski', in *Levinas and Medieval Literature: The 'Difficult Reading' of English and Rabbinic Texts*, ed. by Ann W. Astell & J. A. Jackson (Duquesne University Press: Pittsburgh, 2009), pp. 137–156; Masha Raskolnikov, *Body Against Soul: Gender and 'Sowlehele' in Middle English Allegory* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), pp. 168–196.

(though I do examine cross-dressing in chapter 2) and I see the personifications, and other characters in the poem, as richly – if fragmentarily – embodied. I look at the body as a mysterious material object in constant, complex encounters with meaning.

Mary Clemente Davlin provides much of the framework for my understanding of the body in *Piers*. She locates it as a site of intense devotional expression in the poem and as the centre of a loving focus for Langland.¹⁹ Davlin explores how detailed descriptions of body parts, shapes, and postures, as well as discussions of kinship, the unity or division of body and soul, and the depictions of the body in devotional activity create a paradoxical substratum of embodied physicality in a poem that might be read as only concerned with the spiritual.²⁰ She describes the lack of overt condemnation – or condemnatory depictions – of the body, even when it appears in moments of sexual or gluttonous sinfulness as indicative of the poet's deep affinity with the embodied.²¹ While the body can be the source of sin in the poem, she notes that

¹⁹ Davlin, 'Human Body'. Burrow describes how Langland's 'fictive imagination' is drawn surprisingly often to the gestures and looks of bodies and how he creates a separate level of meanings through them; this reading is supported by responses from Priscilla Martin, who sees the gestures of the cosmos as providing a sophisticated silent articulation of the incarnation, and Sandra Pierson Prior, who argues that uncertain bodily gestures indicate disloyalty and a lack of truth. J. A. Burrow, 'Gestures and Looks in *Piers Plowman*', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 14 (2000), 75-94. Davlin adds descriptions of posture in the poem to Burrow's comments, arguing that the posture of prayer is an embodied, affective form of medieval devotional expression echoed in daily life through walking kneeling, rising, sitting, lying down and more intimate acts, 'Devotional Postures in *Piers Plowman* B, with an Appendix on Divine Postures', *The Chaucer Review*, 42 (2007), 161-179.

²⁰ Davlin, 'Human Body', 156.

²¹ Davlin, 'Human Body', 151-152, 160-61 notes 15-16. In Davlin's exploration of gestures in the poem, she notes that everyday, prosaic gestures are much more central to devotion than ascetic or painful ones: 'fighting, working, and making love' feature in the poem's repertoire of praising bodies ('Postures', p. 168).

this is a state in which it is presented as injured rather than corrupt.²² She points to the *Semyvif* victim of robbers aided by the Samaritan as a sign of the poem's understanding that precious human corporeality – God's 'careful artistic creation' – is fatally wounded by its misuse.²³ The Samaritan's expression of the murderer's forfeit of grace is founded, she argues, on '[t]he almost inexpressible value to God of the living human body'.²⁴ In this reading, even the bodies of the Seven Deadly Sins elicit pity as things mistreated and deformed by an experience with wrongdoing.²⁵

Davlin refers its lack of disgust with the flesh to the poem's intense interest in the incarnation:

If the human body made by God is from the beginning a sign of kinship with God because it is made in God's image and likeness, then the human body after the incarnation, when God takes on human likeness, becomes the bond of that kinship.²⁶

The poem moves between expressions of the similitude of God and mankind –

²² Davlin, 'Human Body', 158.

²³ Davlin, 'Human Body', 158, note 33, 162.

²⁴ Davlin, 'Human Body', 161. Nicolette Zeeman has emphasised the poem's depiction of natural human experience grounded in suffering and sin: experiences of lack that instigate desires for unnameable but correct spiritual goals. So, even where the lived experience of the body is understood in the poem as compromised by suffering, it is a pain that creates aspirations for good. See '*Piers Plowman*' and the *Medieval Discourse of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 157-195. Such desires were seen as fully embodied in later medieval spirituality, to the extent that the body was seen as superior to the soul. See Caroline Bynum, 'Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective', *Critical Inquiry*, 22 (1995), 1-33, (p. 26).

²⁵ Davlin, 'Human Body', 158.

²⁶ Davlin, 'Human Body', 165. Davlin refers back to her earlier work on the poem's punning expressions of meaning in her discussion of how *kyn* is linked to *kynde* and *kyng* around the figure of Christ, *Game*, p. 106.

of the ideal reflection of God innate to a mankind willing to resemble him²⁷ – and investigation of the complexity and fullness with which Christ adopted human form.²⁸ The body, expressed as God's creation and the form he so mysteriously assumes, is expressed as the experiential basis of human understanding. It presents humanity with an understanding so profound and immediate, that the poem (through Peace) describes it as the basis for God's need for incarnation:

For no wiht woet what wele is that neuere wo soffrede
 Ne what is hoet hunger that hadde neuere defaute.
 Ho couthe kyndeliche whit colour descreve
 Yf all the world were whit or swan-whit all thynges?
 [...]
 Ne hadde god ysoffred of som other then hym sulue
 He hadde nat wist witterly where deth were sour or swete.
 [...]
 So god that bigan al of his gode wille
 Bycam man of a mayde, mankynde to saue,
 And soffred to be sold to se the sorwe of deyng.²⁹

God is seen by Peace as adopting humanity to experience the suffering of embodiment as well as creating the diversity he wants to understand by placing Adam in 'solace' then allowing him to sin so as to experience pain (20.228-29).

²⁷ Davlin sees *Piers* itself as imitating the 'unstable creation' that has an immanent God at its centre, *Game*, pp. 113-114.

²⁸ Human imitation of Christ is located by Davlin as dissimilar in *Piers* to its depictions in other late medieval accounts. Rather than in suffering, likeness to Christ is located in the simple sharing of 'human nature, poverty and love with Christ' ('Postures', p. 169). For a description of the focus in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on the body as the source of affective devotion see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 251-59.

²⁹ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. by Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 20.211-214, 217-18, 221-23. All further C-text quotations are from this edition and will be cited by passus and line numbers in the text. The C-text is used throughout (unless otherwise stated) as representative of Langland's 'latest thinking' (C text, ed. Pearsall, p. 3).

In order to know suffering, God must adopt Adam's *kynde*, his nature: '[t]o wyte what he hath soffred in thre sundry places' (20.232). The body, here, is the *kynde* that leads to knowledge: not just the understanding of humanity enabled by incarnation, or the comprehension of woe; it is the knowledge that enables humans to know and describe things (hunger, white, the day, 20.216). The body is the source of human articulation. Its varied experience provides a full grasp of things that is both given by God and coveted by him. Langland is clearly not writing about a world of only white-on-white. His is a poetic universe given profound resonance by physical experiences.

As such, the body is the source of an intense desire for Langland. It is the basis of an experiential variety given by God so that people can understand the world. This gift is so miraculous it instigates divine curiosity for its own creation and approbation for an embodiment that resembles God, yet somehow exceeds his reality in its varied resonance. If the body is the source of expression, Langland naturally wishes to use it to express ideas in his poem.³⁰ However, the body is antagonistic to expression in language that seeks to capture its dense mystery.³¹ Langland therefore uses his poem precisely to stage a meeting between the body and words, to display 'the way in which life is lived at the intersection of the material and the non-material'. His poetry yearns for a full expression of the body, and depicts how the body resists this.

³⁰ In a delineation of ways the body can be used to elucidate language Burrow indicates how bodily gesture is used in the poem in legible, formal supplements to spoken words ('Gestures', pp. 75-78).

³¹ In a delineation of the ways bodies confuse expression Burrow argues that when bodies in *Piers* make gestures not accompanied by speech ('speaking looks') their meaning is frequently unclear ('Gestures', pp. 79-82).

Readers have frequently noted that the poem's focus on poverty reveals its uncomfortable perceptions of lived experience that undermine its statements about ideal human society.³² This has been seen as an opposition between allegorical abstraction and observations of lived experience.³³ In one depiction of poverty in the poem – that I see as instructive in terms of its allegorical focus on the body – Langland expresses his sincere belief in the redemptive and representational qualities of flesh:

yf Glotonye greue pouerte he gadereth the lasse
 For his rentes wol nat reche ryche metes to bugge.
 And thogh his glotonye be of gode ale he goth to a colde beddyng
 And his heued vnheled, vnesylyche ywrye
 For when he streyneth hym to strecche the strawe is his shetes.
 So for his glotonye and his grete synne he hath a greuous penaunce
 That is welowo when he awaketh and wepeth for colde. (16.71-77)

The body is understood here (in a fashion typical for Langland) through the depiction of sharp, local, and fragmented feeling. The poor man's cold head, cricked neck, the itchy straw of his sheets and his painful waking hangover all make use of the body's capabilities to evoke feeling and denote a sense of painful lack that fulfils ideas of poverty. They establish a dense feeling of the experience of being within a poor man's body rather than an illustrative image of that body's exterior. This allows the reader to form an intimate connection with the embarrassment and discomfort of such pain, placing bodily affect at the centre of interpretation of the word 'poverty' in the poem.

³² See Derek Pearsall, 'Poverty and Poor People in *Piers Plowman*', in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. by Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988), pp. 167-85; Margaret Kim, 'Hunger, Need, and the Politics of Poverty in *Piers Plowman*', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 16 (2002), 131-168; Zeeman, *Desire*, pp. 198-200.

³³ Hewett-Smith, 'Allegory'.

The personification of this figure is uncertain: 'he' is alternately referred to as 'pouerte' and 'the pore'. Morton Bloomfield notes that the definite article marks a non-personification, and the way the poem briefly creates then abandons personifications has been well documented.³⁴ 'Pouerte', therefore, is not a sustained personification but a brief spotlight on a series of painful limbs. These lines, in their exploration of pain, are pregnant with matter – as though the elucidation of suffering could not continue without the emergence of flesh in the throes of feeling. Gluttony's interaction with the poor is one among a description of how each of the Seven Deadly Sins are frustrated in a meeting with poverty. Interacting across lines of poetry, these terms mutually illuminate each other – as when petite poverty slips through Covetousness's long arms and fingers (16.81-84) – and create a depiction of a poem sparking words against each other in a manner that gives way to flesh. The antagonistic energy in these lines envisions a body working against itself – and in doing so illuminates with alarming clarity ('welowo!') the experiential and instructive aspects of enfleshment.

The body here also creates a moment of affect and clarity that exceeds the discursive layer operating at this point in the poem: Patience's complaisant description of the ability of poverty to displace sin. It illustrates how poverty does indeed find pain in greed, but suggests a further resonance in the experience of the body that goes beyond this conclusion. 'Poverty' and 'gluttony' seem insufficient terms to denote this pain. In the poor man's

³⁴ Bloomfield, 'Grammatical', 163; Mann, 'Allegory', pp. 31-35; Griffiths, p. 9.

'welowo' and desolate weeping the reader is discouraged from the explanation offered and seeks new words through which to understand a figure in such pain. The body represents more than the words allocated to it.

This image also proposes a strong and daring sense of how we can understand Christ's body. Elsewhere the poem suggests that in the face of each beggar we may easily be seeing the disguised appearance of Christ: 'pore peple fayle we nat while eny peny vs lasteth, | For in here likenesse oure lord lome hath be yknowe' (12.121-22). Overturning that social gaze, Langland presents the poor as involved in a scene of humiliating private discomfort of which Christ also has knowledge as he walks among them. Langland suggests that an understanding of what 'poverty' means should not arise simply from public charitable encounters, but from an understanding of the hidden pain of the poor man trying to seek bodily comfort. And this is a pain shared intimately with Christ, who dies in the poem like a prisoner '[p]itousliche and pale' (20.58).³⁵ The body's accurate representation is a means in the poem of assessing and understanding its terms; it is also a way of understanding how the holy can enter the world.

Each chapter in this thesis explores an aspect of the interaction of words and bodies that works with the themes discussed in this short analysis. Chapter 1 argues that the words embodied by personifications in the poem utilise and damage the flesh of these bodies to create their meanings. I explore the poem's depictions of the soul within the body and the incarnation to argue that the

³⁵ Christ is linked here to the 'prisoners in puttes' (9.72) shown sympathy in passus 9.

abstract can be imagined as deeply imbricated with the flesh and propose this is a model for how the poem's words inhabit bodies. Chapter 2 argues that clothes form a layer of representative integument distasteful to Langland. He is unorthodox in his depictions of figures in allegory who do not signify through externally worn signs and he repeatedly condemns them or ignores them in order to depict fully corporeal figures and to extract meaning from flesh. I argue that in his understanding of the representative duplicity of clothing Langland finally creates the figure of a cross-dressing Pride in revisions to the C-text. Chapter 3 argues that the body is the victim of consistent representative violence throughout the poem. As the material basis of meaning that frequently misunderstands it, physicality in *Piers* is subjected to repeated acts of violence that overtly display the antagonism between flesh and interpretation (whether literary or political) and show Langland openly engaging with the problems of depicting the body alongside ideologically determined terms. Chapter 4 argues that a full representative consistency with flesh can, finally, be perceived in the shared embodiment with the reader that allegory repeatedly appeals to in order to provoke understanding of its ideas. It examines metaphors of walking in the poem that punctuate its depiction of growing subjective enlightenment with a necessary lived experience on behalf of the reader. I end by looking at depictions of Christ 'sliding' towards Hell in passus 20 to reveal the poem's depiction what human embodiment cannot understand.

The body, for Langland, can draw us into new ways of knowing God and language. As a fleshy object that bears no clear relation to textuality it presents

him with a problem that he solves using allegory: the mode that speaks of concepts through bodies. Langland struggles to make the body enter his poem and as he does so he creates a physical poetics that shows how the body is the best point from which to approach the abstract.

Chapter One

'as wode were afuyre': Allegorical Bodies

This chapter is about the tension between the body and the meaning it represents in personification allegory. Personifications, as Bloomfield has noted, are supposed to express meanings monolithically.¹ As the nouns they embody are altered from abstract to proper nouns, they signify through particular predicates attached to an animate noun. However, the multiple ways in which the generalizing, abstract nouns they are named after signify remain suspended above their action in a way that adds interpretative depth to what they do.² While this grammatical process has been observed and described as the source of semantic density for a poet in love with words, the aspects that relate to the body have not been discussed.³ In this chapter I will examine how the co-presence of the abstract and particular in personification exercises Langland's sensitivity towards bodies. He represents personifications as physically strained by the intersection of their bodies with abstract ideas. I explore this through an enquiry into how Langland's presentation of the body reveals his understanding of the divisions between the spirit and flesh. I look at how metaphoric representations of bodies and descriptions of the incarnation in the poem imagine meetings between matter and the abstract. In delineating these

¹ Bloomfield, 'Grammatical ', 164-65.

² Mann, 'Allegory', p. 21

³ See Bloomfield, 'Grammatical '; Mann, 'Allegory'; Frank, 'Art'.

models I arrive at a description of the poem's representation of the relationship between bodies and abstracts: as wood worked on by a consuming fire.

The Body and the Soul

In *Piers Plowman* three richly allegorical passages express the way the poem, on being asked, might explain its conceptualisation of the body.⁴ The first comes from the friars Will meets at the beginning of his search for Dowel:

Lat bryng a man in a boet amydde a brood water;
 The wynde and the water and waggyng of the bote
 Maketh the man many tyme to stomble yf he stande.
 For stonde he neuere so stifliche, thorw steryng of the bote
 He bendeth and boweth, the body is so vnstable,
 [...]
 The water is likned to the world, that wayneth and waxeth;
 The godes of this grounde ar like the grete waves
 That as wyndes and wederes waleweth aboute;
 The boet is liknet to oure body that bretil is of kynde. (10.33-37, 44-47)

Like other analogies in the poem, this explanatory discourse is framed elegantly ('Lat bryng', 'The water is likned'), in unambiguous language.⁵ In this case the body is imagined as a frail boat loose upon a sea of sin. The boat is not, however, a representation of a full human figure, but only of the fleshy casing of the body ('oure body that bretil is of kynde'), that which takes the soul out on

⁴ Davlin, 'Human Body', 155-58. Davlin summarizes the distinction between body and soul in the poem, finding the body in the poem to be either sinful or a fundamental aspect of a person's identity - that links a person with incarnate Christ.

⁵ See Chapter 4 for details of the Samaritan's analogy comparing God to a hand.

the sea of the world but can be parted from it.⁶ The soul, the man within the boat, is conceived, like a homunculus, as having a separate being entirely to the boat of skin in which he travels; so he represents the soul through himself having a body: 'its very antithesis'.⁷ When tossed about, he is able to remain 'withynne the borde' if he is righteous; a little figure entirely at the mercy of the volition of the boat, he is imagined here as unstuck from it.⁸ Righteousness can keep him inside as it keeps the boat steady, but there is no other material link between the man and his boat. He is like a ball travelling round in a cup.

In the second passage, not long after, Wit is explaining the dwelling-place of Dowel to Will, he says that Dowel lives:

In a castel that Kynde made of foure kyne thynges.
Of erthe and ayer is hit maed, ymedled togyderes,
With wynd and with water wittily enioyned.
Kynde hath closed ther-ynne, craftily withalle,
A lemman that he louyeth ylyke to hym sulue.

⁶ In Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* Reason takes the Dreamer out of his body and he experiences an extraordinary weightless flight. See Chapter 2. For details of texts that discuss this same break between body and soul in gendered terms see Raskolnikov, *Body*, pp. 20-24. The figure of the world as a sea is a commonplace. See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 44; Aristotle compares the soul and body with a sailor in a boat in *De anima*, II. I. See *The Prick of Conscience*, ed. by James H. Morey (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012): 'the worlde may lyckened be | Mooste properly unto tho see' (ll. 1213-14), where the tides are seen as the waves of Fortune; see Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. and trans. by Armand Strubel (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1992), in which Fortune lives in a house on a rocky island constantly attacked by the waves, but never overcome by them (ll. 5917-5924). All further references will be to this edition and will be indicated by line numbers in the text. Chaucer's 'The Man of Law's Tale', unites the images of Fortune's sea and the maintenance of Custance's boat by righteousness: 'O my Custance, ful of benignytee, | [...] He that is lord of Fortune be thy steere' (CT 2.446-48).

⁷ Michael Camille, 'The image and the self: unwriting late medieval bodies' in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. by Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 62-99 (p. 70). Camille notes that the soul 'was only visualised in its movements into and out of the body that it defined' (p. 70). See also *The Book of the Duchess*, where Juno instructs Morpheus to 'crepe into the body' of Ceyx, so he can animate it and make it explain its fate to Alcyone (l. 144).

⁸ This is a very different conception of the body from those described by Bynum in 'Fuss' (pp. 19-27).

Anima she hatte; to here hath enuye
 A proued prikeare of Fraunce, *princeps huius mundi*,
 And wolde wynde here awaye with wyles and he myhte. (10.129-36)

The castle now represents the border of the body, and it is clearly a more fleshy structure than the boat.⁹ With its 'erthe and ayer [...] ymedled togyderes' and 'wynd and water wittily enioyned', it is a body made up of the four elements that Langland manages to make sound like tissue and fluid.¹⁰ His verbs 'ymedled' and 'enioyned' (and the adjectives 'wittily' and 'craftily') make the process of forming a body seem like the combination of minute particles, layers, and liquids. As a wall of skin enclosing the soul it is another space in which body and spirit stand together but are not united: the knight patrolling outside

⁹ The body as a castle, representing either a woman's or a man's body, was a common figure throughout medieval literature. See Malcolm Hebron, *The Medieval Siege: Theme and Image in Middle English Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 136-165, for a discussion of the siege motif in medieval allegory that encompasses a wide discussion of different bodies imagined as besieged castles. Sieges can be divided into sieges of love and sieges of the soul. In 'The Tale of Melibee' in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, we see a siege of the soul: the hero's body is figuratively described as his house, with his five daughters – like Inwit's 'fyue fayre sones' (CT 10.145) – in it who are wounded by the three intruders, his 'olde foes' (CT 7.968-972), Prudence glosses this, saying Melibee has let the flesh, the devil, and the world into his body 'by the wyndowes' (CT 7.1422). The castle of Jalousie in the *Roman de la Rose* is a robust example of a siege of love, in which we see the woman's body as a bastion worthy of (according to Hebron often complex and accurate) attack. See the acid comment made by Chaucer's Wife of Bath (taken from the *Rose*: 8597-8600): 'Thou seyst men may nat kepe a castel wal, | It may so longe assailed ben overal' (CT 3.263-64). The *Ancrene Wisse* sees the body as a castle attacked by corrupting enemies but also assailed by a beautiful lover in Christ, who woos the soul within and finally lays down his life to save her from her foes. See *Middle English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and 'Ancrene Wisse'*, ed. by Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 112-14. And *The Castle of Perseverance*, ed. by David N. Klausner (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), a morality play in which a fight for the soul is enacted around the castle where it is ensconced. The manuscript includes a stage plan in which the mechanics of the attack are visualised. See Roger Sherman Loomis, 'The Allegorical Siege in the Art of the Middle Ages', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 23 (1919), 255-269, for details of sieges ranging from sieges of love acted in courts and cities, images on ivories, tapestries, and a marginal image of a siege in the Luttrell Psalter.

¹⁰ Langland is unusual in the fleshiness he attributes to the castle walls. Other images and descriptions are happy to imagine the castle accurately as architecture. The *Ancrene Wisse* comes closest to Langland in describing the castle as 'an eorðene castel' (a castle of clay), p. 112.

is ready to whisk *Anima* from God, her lover.¹¹

In the third passage, *Liberum Arbitrium* discusses with Will his strange presence in the world, saying he 'may nat be withoute a body to bere me where hym liketh' (16.178). He is carried around like another little homunculus by a body with its own will. And *Liberum Arbitrium* is clearly presented as a person in his own right, as both homunculus and man. Will and he talk, he has independence of being and expression, and when Will sees and approaches him his charming diffidence is expressed in very social terms:

Thenne had Y wonder what he was, that *Liberum Arbitrium*
 And preyde Patience that Y apose hym moste.
 And he soffrede me and saide, 'Assay his other name.'
 'Leue *Liberum Arbitrium*,' quod Y, 'of what lond are ye?' (16.162-65)

He is intimidating, and a character who can be understood in terms of geographical origin (while retaining some of *Anima*'s mystery from the B text: we wonder why the dreamer wants to know *what* he is). He is the 'ledare' of Actif (16.158): one man acting in physical relation to another. So when *Liberum Arbitrium* is borne about within another, he represents the soul, or spirit of

¹¹ Unusually, again, the knight associated with the soul in this courtly image is the devil and not Christ, the lover-knight – envisioned in the closing passūs of the poem. For motifs of Christ as a knight, including those where he is presented as a lover, see Wilbur Gaffney, 'The Allegory of the Christ-Knight in *Piers Plowman*', *PMLA*, 46 (1931), 155-68; see also 'In a Valley of this Restless Mind', in *Moral Love Songs and Laments*, ed. by Susanna Greer Fein (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998). Pearsall sees this as 'an allusion to the pride and viciousness of the French, C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 10.135.

man's free will as, again, another person moving freely in a fleshy interior.¹²

But when the dreamer takes him up on this, asking the question that is potentially on our own lips, the matter becomes more complicated:

'Thenne is that body bettere then thou?' quod Y. 'Nay,' quod he, 'no bettere,
Bote as wode were afuyre thenne worcheth bothe
And ayther is otheres hete and also of o will;
And so is man that hath his mynde myd *Liberum Arbitrium*.' (16.179-182)¹³

In this image of wood on fire, the body and its animating principle enter into a more complex intermixture than heretofore imagined by the text. *Liberum Arbitrium* cannot be described in this passage as an animating spirit that rattles around in the cage of the body. Instead he is present in the physical link that occurs between fire and wood during combustion: the point at which the two meet and are physically inseparable. This is still an image of solid matter

¹² In the B text, *Anima* appears without any of this social awkwardness. The dreamer falls asleep and sees: 'as it sorcerie were, a sotil thyng withalle— I Oon withouten tonge and teeth' (B.15.12-13). Here we see the soul deliberately imagined as vague, faceless, and unseeable. It is interesting, though, that Langland starts with a face from which he removes things (tongue and teeth) as though an entirely disembodied spirit is impossible to imagine. The B text contains none of the discussion of *Anima*'s relation to the body just discussed though it does involve the description from Isidore. See James J. Paxson, 'Personificational Face', for a discussion of *Anima*'s face that compares it to a vagina.

¹³ In thinking of people without their minds, the 'lunatyk lollares' are immediate examples. They, however, have definitive protection from the degradation of spirit we imagine would occur were a person to be without *Liberum Arbitrium* (with his links to the Holy Spirit, and Christ's *lechecraeft* 18.137), and merely act without the various human qualities *Liberum Arbitrium* defines himself as holding 183-201a. Elizabeth Fowler takes Meed as an example of a character lacking in the qualities bought into the soul through *Liberum Arbitrium*: 'To the extent that Conscience is linked to will, to soul, or to the various guises described *Liberum Arbitrium*, Meed is empty and void' (*Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 118). Though the problem arises, then, of the fact she clearly has her faculties about her. The exact relationship between Free Will, doing good, and being sane here is unclear, and perhaps a casualty of the revision, where *Anima*'s qualities as the spirit that enables humanity are still listed. See Britton J. Harwood, 'Liberum Arbitrium in the C text of *Piers Plowman*', *Philological Quarterly*, 52 (1973), 680-95, for discussion of *Liberum Arbitrium* in a scholastic context, Harwood concludes he represents: 'a separate faculty composed of will and reason' (p. 684).

meeting with an untouchable, consuming gas, but it is one in which there can be no break, the two things (whatever the detriment to the perishable wood) are working 'of o will'. This is reminiscent of Lechery's filthy confession 'bygan Y to grope, | Til bothe oure wil was oen' (6.180-81), and brings the body and soul into an involved physical meeting.¹⁴ Fire, instead of being one of the elements that elegantly makes up the human form (10.130), is now described as the force that irresistibly ravishes it.¹⁵ The spirit of free will, therefore, is imagined in a description of the body where the flesh is conceptualised as indivisible from the abstract principle that gives it life. The body has ceased to be a container in this description and becomes the fuel that enables life while it is consumed by it.

As the passage continues, Langland returns to material from the B text, and *Liberum Arbitrium* describes himself as a series of different principles each acting with a social body within the body, and finally as that which escapes the body after death: 'And when Y fle fro the body and feye leue the caroyne | Thenne am Y spirit spechelees and *Spiritus* then Y hote' (16.197-98).¹⁶ That this spirit is speechless enforces the idea that it has no corporeal being. Speech is

¹⁴ In Chapter 3 I discuss how the imposition of form on matter which occurs in personification can be seen as as like a sexual union in which feminized matter is imprinted with meaning. See Raskolnikov, pp. 20-22, for details of how bodies and souls were 'married' in some medieval allegories.

¹⁵ Another image that discusses the complexly indiscriminate and consuming nature of fire is 3.90-107, where the narrator describes how God's vengeance falls in the form of fire on the houses of the good and the bad alike: 'And then falleth ther fuyr on fals men houses | And gode mennes for here gultes gloweth on fuyr aftur' (3.102-3).

¹⁶ Mann describes the multiplicity of names that converge around this single personification saying: 'many nouns converge on an underlying unity, which is verbal not nominal. The noun is dissolved into the verb; it is simply the freeze-frame in which verbal activity is artificially stilled' ('Langland and Allegory', p. 37). I am not analysing the personification in her grammatical frame – but this idea of a shifting name suggests a changing shape that ends in spirit.

clearly the means through which personifications assert their embodiment in the poem. In the final instance, therefore, where the boundaries between the spirit and body are made clear through death, *Liberum Arbitrium* returns to the image of the body as a place with definable boundaries within which spirits and abstracts move and work.

Fire returns in the Samaritan's description of *unkyndenness*, in which he describes the human body and soul as a torch made to worship the trinity: 'ho-so morthereth a goed man, me thynketh bi myn inwit, | A fordoth the lihte that oure lord loketh to haue worship of' (19.264-65). The *unkynde* act of murder is an unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit to his understanding.¹⁷ Murder destroys what 'the holy goest hath to kepe' (19.260), namely 'lyf and loue, the leye of mannes body' (19.261). The Holy Spirit, free will, life, and love are the fires that burn flesh. Destroying the torch that represents the body and the soul is a dismantling of the unique nature of man's body while it is burning: a duo made for praising god. Davlin writes that this image represents the embodied soul as uniquely precious to God.¹⁸ It is in a state of perfect unity – of fire and wick – bought by Christ and protected by the Trinity as the source of devotion and object of love. An ideal image of embodiment sees it as a torch in which spirit burns on the body.

In a further simile of fire, the Samaritan compares sins against the Holy Spirit to the state of a man living in a smoky house. This man could address the

¹⁷ See Hugh White, *Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988), pp. 105-8.

¹⁸ Davlin, 'Human Body', 161-62.

smoke by bringing in 'bettere wode' or could blow his fire until it burnt (19.312), that is, he could cease his *unkyndenness* and start to use his soul and body as God intended. The smoke 'smerteth his yes | Til he be bler-eyede or blynde and the borre in his throte' (19.309-10). An imperfect relationship with the quickening fire of life and grace is seen as a billowing cloud that blinds. Improper burning is deadly for the soul. The poem's ideal image of the soul is of a merrily crackling fire, but it is possible for this fire to burn badly or too much.

In each of these cases Langland explores different figural articulations of the body and the soul. And in each, apart from the image of fire, the poem clearly expresses its understanding of the two as figuratively separable. In the first two instances, especially, while the dreamer's understanding of Dowel is establishing itself, it feels as though there is a place for the soul outside the different bodily containers described. Initially we see the waves attempting to upset the body and get the spirit out and in another the devil as a proud French knight patrols the borders of the body's castle, trying to tempt it. When the spirit finally leaves the body, it does so with the body as a corpse, and it becomes apparent that in each case the passage of the soul outward was a precursor for death. Moreover, the spirit has had an oddly detrimental effect on the body, wearing it down like fire as it makes it shine. The earlier images rely on creating a spatial reality for the external to which the soul is being drawn at the same time as they give the body discrete and permeable boundaries. So, Langland moves between seeing the body as the container or carrier to something less material than itself – a thing that cannot be contained by it and

ultimately transcends it – and as the combustible basis to a spirit that wears it down, and with which it works together in one will like partners in sex.

Personifications: Wood and Fire

In attempts to understand the workings of personification in allegory, the same model can be applied to the strange meeting of body and abstract principle that personification encloses. The abstract, in the case of a personification, lives inside the body as a principle that animates it and dictates everything it does. The body of the personification is inconceivable without this spirit, yet, like the soul, it is almost impossible to locate within it, or to see perfectly on the outside of it. So, where Contrition, in the well-known line, has 'clene foryete to crye and to wepe' (22.369) we wonder whether he has previously made himself be 'Contrition' though a constant, conscious remembering of who he is and a performance of the same.¹⁹ Or where Envy cries out in desperation:

May no sugre ne swete thing aswage my swellynge
Ne derworth drynke dryue hit fro myn herte
Ne nother shame ne shryfte, but ho-so shrapede my mawe? (6.88-90)

Like the fire of *Liberum Arbitrium*, Envy's envy and his body seem to feed off each other – work 'of o wil' – and this physically transforms him into a fleshy

¹⁹ A similar line in *Troilus and Criseyde* describes the imprisonment of personification in the performance of a defining act. Pandarus says of Fortune 'For if hire whiel stynte any thyng to torne, | Then cessed she Fortune anon to be'. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1.848-49.

signifier of his uncomfortable nature.²⁰

Both of these examples express the relationship between the physical and the abstract as more involved than the elegant images above of the little man inside a building or boat of skin. James Paxson has commented that: 'some of Langland's personifications approach the ontological density of real humans [...]. That density arises [...] from both the poet's complex representation of interiority and flesh and bone human physicality'.²¹ Langland uses the interiors of personifications' bodies to express their named characteristics. But he also uses acts of repetition, the simple enacting of a principle, to show who personifications are supposed to be. Hende-speche, for example, is able to quite plainly show how he enacts his name when he courteously requests the entry of the friars before the barn falls. This is a socialising 'habitus': a series of acts that, as Elizabeth Fowler says, represents 'the human being socialized – the shapeless, fleshy mass that has been licked into a bear cub by its mother, to use the traditional anecdote'.²² Some speakers in the poem describe bodies as containers with spirits freely roaming inside them, but its presentation of personifications displays the body and its 'spirit' (a term I am using to denote the abstract that is presented by personification) in a complex and involved

²⁰ Something like this occurs in the *Roman de la Rose* in the images of Avarice and Sorrow on the exterior of the garden wall – green (l. 200) and scratching her face (ll. 311-12). Chaucer's use of physiognomy reverses this process – the different facial features he uses to depict his characters' characters require the reader to believe in the unconvincing art of reading facial features.

²¹ James J. Paxson, 'The Personificational Face', p. 139.

²² Fowler, p. 12. See Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and their Posterity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), where she discusses the links between character and meaning in personification (p. 26).

series of interactions.

The relationship of the soul to the body in these examples resembles the incarnation as it is imagined in the poem. The incarnation also has a place in medieval literary theory as a model for signification. Theorists saw words as similar to Christ's body in that they contained meanings that existed outside them.²³ In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine writes that:

our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us.²⁴

This description - of a process in which meaning appears in a physical container - could also apply to personification: in which a human figure incarnates an abstract ideal in a such a way that it becomes expressed by her physical being, yet remains complete outside it.²⁵ But, in a poem so interested in the experience of having a human body, this process cannot take place in the clean and simple

²³ This had its corollary in the material world, where things were seen as reflecting a divine intention that was visible to those skilful enough to read it without the mediation of the material thing corrupting the message. See M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, trans. by Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 99-145 (pp. 140-145); Barry Windeatt, 'Signs and Symbols', in *A Concise Companion to Middle English Literature*, ed. by Marilyn Corrie (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 9-31; A. J. Minnis, A. B. Scott, eds, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism: c. 1100-1375, The Commentary-Tradition* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1988), pp. 168-173; Raabe, pp. 15-25 '[s]ymbolism is a formulation of Truth as paradox' (p. 22).

²⁴ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 14.

²⁵ See Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), and 'Colonial Allegories of the Past' in *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*, ed. by Brenda Machosky (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 119-141. In 'Colonial Allegories', Teskey writes that personification gives us: 'The sense that a living body, [...] has been confined to an alien structure of meaning, one in which the human person has been reduced to performing the function of a sign in a system of signs' (p. 131). See chapter 3 for a discussion of Teskey's conclusions: that the body is deadened by violence and forced to become a physical container for abstract meaning.

manner suggested by Augustine.²⁶ The bodies of the poem's personifications do not encase spirits that are materially separable from them.²⁷ Instead, the names and bodies of personifications coexist like the wood and the fire. Words are changed by appearing in bodies, and bodies are ground down by needing to be words.

Meed, for example, couples her love of remuneration (in any form) with a love of sex that she takes very seriously. She uses her body according to one definition of her name. She has taught '[w]vues and wedewes wantonnesse' (3.162), and led others into 'lechery' (3.163), she takes a clerk '[i]nto boure with blisse' (3.11) and tells her confessour to be easy on those who 'lecherye haunteth' (3.57) because '[h]it is but frelete of fleysche' (3.59) – an act she promises them rich reward for – she maintains priests so they can take lovers (3.189). Overall, she is 'tikel of here tayl' (3.168) – according to a self-righteous Conscience sees even his own daughter's 'taylende' as 'foule' (3.370) – and as a result the people see her as a 'queynte comune hore' (4.161) and any husband she might choose as automatically a 'cokewold' (4.159). As Meed's body gets involved in sexual relations, it changes the meaning of her name very

²⁶ For discussions of how allegory highlights the distance of its terms from elucidations of real human experience see: Hewett-Smith, 'Nede', 'Allegory'; Finke, 'Treasure'. Finke writes of Augustine that '[t]hought cannot assume the form of words, even spoken words, and remain unchanged' (p. 54). I agree with Finke that Langland's allegory is deeply concerned with how it conveys meaning but I think the meeting of the embodied and the abstract in the poem is a positive expression of how meaning shifts and alters in relation to the material.

²⁷ See Peggy A. Knapp, 'Wandryng by the Weye: On Alisoun and Augustine', in *Medieval Texts*, ed. by Finke and Shichtman, pp. 142-157, for a discussion of Augustine's views concerning interpretation that argues he resists logocentrism in favour of a dialogic realisation of meaning in texts (itself a gift from the Holy Spirit that exercises the intelligence of the reader).

publicly until, because she transgresses the ideal way for women's bodies to behave, she is considered beyond the pale and asked to leave.²⁸ Meed is transformed through sexual activity from that which must accompany '[m]archaundise' (3.281) to something that becomes:

As comyn as the cartway to knaues and to alle,
To munekes, to alle men, ye, musels in hegge;
Lyggeth by here, when hem lust, lered and lewed. (3.169-71)

Money in Meed becomes the root of all behaviour, discovered everywhere, even in Consience's pocket, Meed says '[t]how hast hanged on my half enleuene tymes | And also grypen my gold and gyue hit where the liked' (3.227-28). Though Consience tries to claim, high-mindedly, that Meed's definition lies in grammar (3.333-368) she is defined by her body and by sex.²⁹ He may call her an 'indirect' relation (3.334), but claiming she was a whore truly sealed her meaning.

Even Peace is influenced by his physical experience into exclusively expressing the ignoble aspects of his meaning.³⁰ He enters the poem with his 'panne bloody' (4.74): showing at once how distaste for conflict has left him physically marked. It affects him semantically as well. Because of what Wrong has done to him he is 'nat hardy for hym vnnethe to loke' (4.63) and gladly

²⁸ See Mann, 'Langland and Allegory', pp. 23-26. Mann describes the way Meed's feminine charms make her seductive in spite of the cold hardness of the money she represents. Mann discusses Meed's grammatical and not her semantic status, looking at how readings that view her alternately as an abstract and a proper noun pose the question: 'is money part of the natural order or not?' (p. 25).

²⁹ See Mann, pp. 35-37.

³⁰ See Jenkins, 'Frustration'. Jenkins sees Peace's response as 'perfect in one sense but foolish in another' – one example of Langland 'frustrating the desire for allegorical tidiness' (p. 128).

accepts gold from him rather than taking him to court. Because of his harrowing physical experience Peace signifies peace at all costs (almost cowardice), rather than the joyous peace bought by Christ that is introduced in passus 20 by the daughter of God who skips at the harrowing with the joy of knowing of the resurrection (20.171).

Langland cares more for the humanity of his actors than he does for regulating the meanings of his words. So being in bodies changes the words signified by the personifications in the poem. And the way Langland approaches the incarnation is very similar.

The Incarnation: Word Enfleshed

In his understanding of the incarnation, Langland imagines Christ's body as like the castle and the boat – flesh separable from and enclosed by a physical thing – but he also imagines it as like the fire – burning on and changing the physical, and being changed by it. Christ enters into a complex relationship with the physical in Langland's telling, while occasionally a clear divide between Christ's spirit and his body is imagined. While meaning is, for Langland, unstoppably corrupted by its meeting with the body, he retains in his mind the image of an incarnation that sees spirit come into the world without

alteration.³¹ As Cristina Maria Cervone has written, Langland's understanding of the incarnation is part of a poetics that seeks to understand it through verse: 'a thoroughgoing, organic, and flexible mode of thought that pursues comprehension over time, evolving as it matures'.³² He is aware of how the incarnation can be seen as spirit stepping into flesh as he is aware of ideas of the body and the soul as separable and personification as embodying word in an uncomplex way. However, he uses his allegory to alter these conclusions according to his imaginative sensitivities surrounding embodiment. In each case, he shows how the meetings of bodies with ideas, spirits, and abstracts create new unions that affect both.

Cervone calls the incarnation 'God's *personification* of his language of love', and so the way in which it is understood by Langland in and through poetic metaphor provides his readers with a basis for understanding the quintessential way in which he saw bodies and words interacting.³³ The incarnation does not unfold sequentially in the poem so I am going to begin

³¹ It is important to note here that the meanings of Christ's body were themselves prey to a struggle for power in Langland's society, and so Christ himself had the role of a personification of many other things. His body was 'played with in an almost alarming variety of shifting social roles' by a belief that saw his physicality as a cornerstone in the production of identities: ecclesiastical and secular, personal and communal (Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 4). In this context Langland's representations of the incarnation make a particularly bold series of statements. For the strangeness of Langland's depiction of the crucifixion in the context of affective piety in the fourteenth century see Mary Clemente Davlin, *The Place of God in 'Piers Plowman' and Medieval Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 77; David Aers, 'Christ's Humanity and *Piers Plowman*: Contexts and Political Implications', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 8 (1994), 107-126; Benson, 'Wall Paintings', 21-23.

³² Cristina Maria Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 4. Cervone sees incarnational writing as delighting in metaphor and focussing on Christ's enfleshment, both relevant insights here.

³³ Cervone, *Poetics*, p. 6.

examining its depiction in the poem at passus 18 with the description of the fall as apples from the Tree of Charity and the redemptive realisation of the incarnation through the annunciation. The three images I will examine each in turn have a more troublingly fleshy aspect because the poem shifts between depictions of Christ as spirit unconnected to body and Christ as a body burnt with the spirit. The spectrum of such distinctions is always operating in the poem. Langland understands ideas of Christ's incarnation as the arrival of his spirit in a container just as he understands the same about representation in personification. When he writes, though, he is full of a more complex sensibility: that bodies are changed by the abstracts that are in them. Christ's spirit, in the images treated below of the incarnation, is involved in unsettling interactions with the flesh he finds himself in. There is no way, Langland proves, that spirit can just alight within skin.

As the first event in a series of acts that brought Christ to earth, the way the poem imagines the arrival of Christ is as a spirit elegantly enclosed in a wall of flesh:

And thenne spak *Spiritus Sanctus* in Gabriele's mouthe
 To a mayde that hihte Marie, a meke thyng withalle
 That oen Iesus, a iustices sone, moste iouken in here chaumbre.
 (18.123-25)

This metaphor imagines the first material place that Christ will arrive in the world as a 'chaumbre': an architectural interior where the flesh is again seen as a

wall.³⁴ As Christ's first experience with human embodiment, this is spatialized and discrete.³⁵ Christ's spirit will have no encounters with the messy inside of a real womb or body, just as Mary's purity does not engage with the carnality of natural procreation.³⁶ He is not imbricated with her, but a spirit moving within her decorous interior that is separable from it. And he enters it like a true spirit – flying into the space and perching in it – moving like a bird with no hint of a fleshy or physical relationship with his mother and 'graciously' resting there until the appointed time.³⁷

By imagining the Annunciation in this way Langland is following a conventional piece of iconography found in fourteenth- and fifteenth- century

³⁴ This is comparable to the elaborate or bourgeois interiors of fifteenth-century annunciation scenes. Davlin, *Place*, p. 69. As a chamber, Mary's womb is clean: 'a homely image of a small, welcoming interior space' (Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 146 and fig. 6.3).

³⁵ This is a common description of Mary's relationship to the divine. See *MED*, 'chaumbre', n., 3; Bynum, *Feast*, p. 268 for descriptions of Mary as a 'shrine' and 'tabernacle'; Gibson, *Theater*, p. 154 on the house at Walsingham: 'a mimetic representation for the indwelling of God' (p. 142).

³⁶ Virginity was imagined as existence in a clean chamber in *Pearl*: 'I schulde not tempte thy wyt so wlonc, | To Krystes chambre that art ichose', *Pearl, Cleannes, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by A. C. Cawley and J. J. Anderson (London: Dent, 1985), ll. 903-4. 'Chambre' here is glossed as 'bridal chamber'; Christ therefore goes inside the room of a virgin in the same way as virgins will later enter his room as a sign of their purity.

³⁷ Pearsall glosses 'iouken' as to perch, 'a technical term in hawking'. C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 18.125. Davlin understands it as to 'dwell'. Davlin, *Place*, p. 69. The *MED* has it as both 'Of birds: to roost' and 'of persons: to lie asleep, slumber, rest, dwell', *MED* 'jouken', v., 1. The first of these readings of 'iouken' is understood as the more likely, as well as being the one which unites greater extremes by placing a perched bird in the existing image of Mary's womb as a room. T. D. Hill, 'A Liturgical Allusion in 'Piers Plowman' B.XVI.88', *Notes and Queries*, 22 (1975), 531-32, discusses the origins of the two translations (falconing in W. W. Skeat's 1886 edition, sleeping in J. F. Goodridge's 1966 translation), he believes it to be wrongly translated as sleep, as Skeat asserted the word is only ever used to mean the sleep of a bird. 'Graciously' is Davlin's word (*Place*, p. 69). The descent of Christ to earth as a bird is a traditional allegorical gloss on the incarnation. See, Hill (p.532, n. 8) and Cristina Maria Cervone, 'Christ the Falcon', *Notes and Queries*, 55 (2008), 277-82. This is a separate tradition to that of Holy Spirit descending to Mary, though Langland is clearly referring to both here.

art, where Christ can be seen as a little homunculus flying through the air towards Mary's body.³⁸ But while *Piers* can be read alongside depictions where Christ is spatially distinct from Mary's body, Langland takes this idea and adapts it according to the physical richness of his material imagination. So, he mixes up conventional depictions of Christ until he is a bird flying into Mary's womb – the chamber of her body – where he perches until the correct time.³⁹ The introduction of the animal into this decorous and safe interior is strange and unsettling, and it sets the tone for Langland's later depictions of the incarnation.

³⁸ In one stained glass window in Norwich, Christ as a minute baby descends to Mary at the Annunciation on a beam of light, preceded by the dove of the Holy-Spirit. Gibson, *Theater*, pp. 146-7 and fig. 6.5. In a fifteenth-century German tympanum, the infant Christ descends on a string (that looks like a water flume in a modern leisure centre) from God's mouth to the Virgin's ear. Gibson, p. 147 and fig. 6.6. In Roger Campin's, *Mérode Altarpiece* (1435), Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Christ is a homunculus holding a cross that descends through the window on a beam of light projected at Mary's womb. Gibson, *Theater*, p. 146 and fig. 6.3.

³⁹ Cervone finds numerous places in which Christ is described as a falcon, including an early-fifteenth century sermon for the dedication of an altar to St Anne in British Library MS Harley 2268. The writer has difficulties with connotations his image raises of Christ flying to earth to eat his prey mankind, so replaces these with images of a eucharistic feast on the falcon's heart. Cervone identifies motifs that imagine Christ's bloody body as a lure for the soul, a hawk, in a poem in British Library, Add. 37049 and Cambridge University Library MS Gg. vi. 16, fol. 36. She notes how in the angel choir in Lincoln Cathedral (completed 1280), an angel holds up a bird's leg lure for the soul/hawk. She also mentions that the 'fawcon' in the 'Corpus Christi Carol' could be read as one such motif. The 'fawcon', in this context, could be the soul of man, bearing Christ the Knight away to death and suffering. 'Falcon', 277-280, and nn. 10, 13, 'Corpus Christ Carol', in *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by R. T. Davies (London: Faber and Faber, 1963; repr. 1990), p. 272. Marie de France's lai 'Yonec', in which a knight in the shape of a hawk is mortally wounded on spikes the jealous husband of his lover puts on her window, has been interpreted as an allegory at the centre of which is 'la véritable crucifixion de l'oiseau-chevalier'. The knight's sacrifice enables the lover (the soul) to break out of her tower (the body) and give birth to Yonec, a son, who represents the Holy Spirit (Jacques Ribard, 'Le lai d'Yonec est-il une allégorie chrétienne?', in *The Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P. B. Groult, R. A. Lodge, C. E. Pickford, and E. K. C. Varty (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), pp. 160-69, p. 161). Marie de France, 'Yonec', in *Lais de Marie de France*, trans. by Alexandre Micha (Flammarion: Paris, 1994), pp. 192-221.

In another conventional image,⁴⁰ *Liberum Arbitrium* describes the deceptive arrival of the spirit to Muhammad:

He endaunted a douue and day and nyhte here fedde;
 In ayther of his eres priueliche he hadde
 Corn that the coluere eet when he come in places
 And in what place he prechede and the people tauhte
 Thenne sholde the coluere come to the clerkes ere,
 Menyng as aftur mete, thus Macumeth here enchauntede.
 And when the coluer cam thus then knelede the peple
 For Macometh to men swaer hit was a messenger of heuene
 And sothliche that god sulue in suche a coluere lyknesse
 Tolde hym and tauhte hym how to teche the peple. (17.171-180)

The corollary between this and Christ perching in Mary's chamber is clear. But Langland makes it obvious how they differ: he teases out the commonplace details of this trick in a long and descriptive passage that strongly contrasts with the allusive compactness of his description of the incarnation. Here the training of the dove (17.171-73), the Prophet's plans (17.174-76), what actually occurs (17.177), and how Muhammad glosses it (17.178-80) all appear. It is an exhaustive process with no mystery, and with a deep separation between the abstract and the material. There is no relationship or transformation between the two as the abstract is not at play here – only an empty signifier for it. In delineating this trick *Liberum Arbitrium* is also using language he attributes to the Saracens and to Jews who, he says, see Christ as a 'iogelour, a iapare amonges the comune, | And a sofistre of soercerie and a *seudo-propheta*' (17.308-9). Here Jews see Christ's true miracles as wrought 'with

⁴⁰ See Etienne de Besançon, *Alphabet of Tales: An English 15th Century Translation of the Alphabetum Narrationum of Etienne de Besançon*, ed. by Mary Macleod Banks (London: Kegan, 1904, 1905), p. 165. Discussing 'Machomett', it describes how: 'he vsid to putt whete-cornys in his ere, & he lernyd a white dowffe to stand opori his shulder & take þaim oute'.

soercerye' (17.304). In describing what he sees as a deception *Liberum Arbitrium* alludes to the incarnation to prove the difference between a spirit that truly and complexly enters the body and a trick where nothing but the interaction of a real animal and a real human occurs. Langland instinctively places an act he dismisses as a ruse in the context of a display of embodiment that sees the body as contained and wholly separate from mystery: as having no interaction with the spirit or with words.

Langland's ability to imagine the incarnation as an involved and transformative interaction between spirit and flesh is foregrounded in Imaginatif's description of it as like an organized sport with Mary's womb as a basket or net, and the flight of Christ from heaven more of a lob than the delicate descent of a bird:

the hey holi gost heuene shal to-cleue
And loue shal lepe out aftur into this lowe erthe
And clennesses shal cach hit and clerkes shollen hit fynde. (14.84-86)

Here, Mary as Cleanness catches Christ in her womb.⁴¹ This shares with the later passage the shock of an unexpected revelation; it uses future tense like 18.125 and so has 'the otherworldly character of a future action that has already taken place'.⁴² But the relationship of that revelation to the physical world is

⁴¹ See Michael W. Twomey, 'Christ's Leap and Mary's Clean Catch in *Piers Plowman* B. 12.136-44a and C.14.81-88a' in *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 5 (1991), 165-174. Twomey argues that 'Love' and 'Clennesses' represent Christ and the Virgin, but associates *clennesses* with the clergy in the context of Imaginatif's project of establishing clergy as the correct means through which to translate the word to the world.

⁴² Cervone, *Poetics*, p. 105.

different.⁴³ Where above a bird flies and rests in an open room/womb, here the incarnation appears as a desperate jump, an imperative risk that is only settled by the equally wild behaviour of Mary, who catches Love with her insides.⁴⁴ Her womb becomes a basket, a tool, with which she is able through purity (or cleanness) to save Love. Though there is still spatial distinctness here there is also an intimation of the real desire of Love/Christ to come into the world; a desire so strong it/he leaps blindly.⁴⁵ Mary, in this context, is a fortuitous catcher, a person who opens her body and makes it available for Christ to enter.

This image of the catch at first evokes and uses ideas that see Mary as spatially distinct from the love she is catching. It leads the reader to imagine how a woman might seize such a missile from heaven, and an image of her holding out her skirts springs to mind – one that has a corollary elsewhere in the poem when the dreamer sees the population of Hell living inside Faith's (or Abraham's) lap. In this passage Faith looks very much like a pregnant woman: the dreamer first notices something is strange about his figure when he notices his 'wyde clothes' (18.269) and the way there is something in his 'bosome' that he has 'blessede ofte' (18.270); 'bosom' is a word strongly associated with Abraham's lap, with embraces, the heart, and hollow things, but it also has the

⁴³ See A. C. Spearing, 'Langland's Poetry: Some Notes in Critical Analysis', *Leeds Studies in English*, 14 (1983), 182-95 (p. 192).

⁴⁴ See Davlin, *Place*, pp. 56, 65. Cervone relates this image to an insular topos of 'leaps' connecting Christ's leaps in the incarnation, crucifixion and annunciation to the vitality of the church, *Poetics*, pp. 106-114.

⁴⁵ 'Lepe' follows a traditional gloss on the Song of Songs 2:8 ('See how he comes, leaping on the mountains, bounding over the hills') read as Christ's jump to earth. Ben H. Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity in 'Piers Plowman'* (Mouton: Paris, 1966), p. 30 and n. 26; Twomey, pp. 167-68. The traditional gloss on the love between the bride and bridegroom as that between Christ and his church furthers the passage's emphasis on the purity and correctness of clergy.

rare sense of 'womb'.⁴⁶ Looking (before he asks), the dreamer sees 'a lazar lay thereynne | With patriarkes and profetes pleyng togyderes' (18.271-2) and when he asks what 'is in thy lappe' (18.274) Faith just shows him, saying 'Loo!' (18.275) and it is left to the dreamer to express shock at the impossible thing displayed before him: 'Lord, mercy!' (18.275). Faith is strangely pregnant with his load. He says the souls he carries are '[l]ollynge' in his lap (18.285) and he has been laid claim to with them by the devil (18.278) as though they were physically inseparable. He says that Christ will 'delyuere' them (18.282) and is able to walk about with the denizens of Hell still somehow still within him, but not visible. Like the body of man described by *Liberum Arbitrium*, with all his distinct qualities personified, Faith is able to enclose many others (millions in his case) within himself without much physical discomfort. His body has attached itself to the souls in Hell as though he were pregnant with them. Langland is drawn towards ideas that bodies and spirits mix together.

The spatial metaphor of Faith's lap mimics the iconography of the catch, and is itself very like a fifteenth-century German statue of the incarnation that sees Christ as resting in the folds of Mary's dress. Both these images suggest a way for spiritual things to land inside the body as though smothered in the layers of its cloth.⁴⁷ And iconography of Mary did imagine her weaving for Christ a coat of skin made from her own, depicted in images of the pregnant

⁴⁶ MED, 'bosome', n., 2b, 3a, 4b.

⁴⁷ In the statue both Anne and Mary have open slits in the fronts of their dresses in which their infants can be seen, waiting to be born. Gibson, *Theater*, pp. 7-8 and figs 1.1-2.

Mary pulling thread across the sacred space of her body.⁴⁸ *Piers* imagines Christ, in moments, wearing the skin of humans around his body like a coat as a way of understanding the separateness of his divine being to his physical body and therefore expressing the strange realities of the incarnation. When considering the blessing of mankind's sins leading to the incarnation, Repentance describes how Christ 'in our secte, as hit semed, deyedest, | On a Friday in fourme of man' (7.129-30), where 'secte' means coat.⁴⁹ When describing the Resurrection, he says 'thow yedest in oure sekte' (7.136), and considering Christ's life as a whole he muses 'thy douhtiokest dedes was don in

⁴⁸ Gibson, *Theater*, figs 6.8, 6.11, and esp. figs 6.12-13, and pp. 155-7, 159, 161, 163-4, 166. This also makes sense of the fact that femininity was specifically seen as linked to the physical and embodied by much medieval thought, see Caroline Bynum, 'The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 39, (1986), 399-439, p. 407, plate 3. Reliquaries of the umbilical cord also show these links as they discuss the fleshy link between Christ and Mary. For a reliquary of the cord in a glass-covered container on Christ's stomach, see 'Virgin with the Christ Child' Musée de Cluny, Paris (Cl. 3307), in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann and James Robinson (London: The British Museum Press, 2011), p. 207, cat. no. 124.

⁴⁹ The *MED* has 'secte' as 'a bodily form, likeness; in oure ~, in our likeness, in human flesh'. *MED*, 'secte', n., 1c. Pearsall renders it literally as 'suit of clothes', C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 7.129; Schmidt glosses 'secte' as 'livery', 'class' and 'division', B text, ed. Schmidt, notes to lines 14.259 and 5.491. He sees the equivalent of these lines in the B text as indicating 'that it was not the divine nature of Christ that suffered crucifixion [...] but the human nature' (William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd ed. (London: Everyman, 1995), note to lines 5.490-91).

Secte is a polyvalent term in the poem, it can mean likeness, but through its associations with retinue or group it also takes the meaning of clothing, and 'the metaphor of human nature or flesh as clothing is an ancient one' (Davlin, *Place*, p. 67). Some examples she cites are: Hildegard of Bingen's description of Christ wearing a 'tunic of humanity' (*Liber Scivias*), Augustine's discussion of God 'clothed in flesh' (*Conf.* 7.19.14), Dante's description of Christ 'clothed in the flesh of Adam' (*Purg.* 11.44), and, most intriguingly, images of people's naked souls escaping from their bodies in death, 'the body not yet having received the new clothing of immortality' (Davlin, *Place*, pp. 67-68).

Depictions of flaying can often unsettlingly make the skin removed from the person look like a garment. See Sarah Kay 'Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 36, 1 (2006), 35-74.

oure sekte' (7.140).⁵⁰ Christ wears human nature again before the crucifixion, when he enters the scene in Piers's arms: '[i]n his helm and in his haberion, *humana natura*' (20.22). Piers's 'plates' are a human covering that evokes skin, and so Christ is riding as a knight within the fleshy but metal casing of his incarnation. Finally, a devil describes him as having a body that 'on bones yede' (20.337), as though it were a soft thing that rested across a more robust and animating skeleton.

This metaphor explores ideas of a distinction between what is on the inside of Christ's body and the humanity of his exterior. Like the elegant room of Mary's womb, the spatiality of this metaphor proposes a body within an exterior that is shaped like something from the everyday world (jacket, armour). Mary catches Christ in a material lap that then forms the fleshy exterior to his body as a little man who walks out as a spirit in a coat. But there are two aspects of this image that upset the idea of that cleanness. In the latter part of 14.86, clerks look into in Mary's body and find the Love she has caught there. This line suggests the abilities of clerks to gloss and understand the mysteries of the appearance of God in the world, but the suggestion it makes simultaneously of an ossified flesh – of Mary as a timelessly pregnant container

⁵⁰ This is altered from B, where the three phrases use *secte*, then *sute*, then *armes* – perhaps a more striking image of humanity taken on as three separate types of human garment. See B. 5.488, 497, 501. For Schmidt, use of the word *sute* 'plays on the senses 'in our cause action-at-law' [...] 'in pursuit of us' and 'in our fleshly form'', he sees these meaning recapitulated later, when Christ is engaged in a chivalric-legal battle with Lucifer, and in which incarnation explicitly becomes a disguise (B text, ed. Schmidt, note to line 5.488). Pearsall writes that the change to *secte* in all cases encourages focus on the mystery of the incarnation. C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 7.140. See *MED*, 'sute' n., 1e: the figurative use of garments to mean human flesh, elsewhere it is garments. Cervone discusses the polysemous term as one whose meaning (especially as it changes from 'sute' in the B text) itself points to the mysteries inherent in the incarnation, *Poetics*, pp. 66-72.

for the meaning of Christ – brings a temporal dimension to the image that negates the simplicity with which we have been understanding Christ's fleshy relationship with Mary until now. It suggests, like Envy's 'mawe', that Mary has been transformed by the spirit to which she gave flesh. And not just transformed; she keeps it within her.⁵¹ And the poem imagines this as her being always pregnant. After she catches love she keeps it until it is found by clerks many centuries later. In this way she ceases to be the coat or the room of Christ, but his reliquary: the preserved object in which his physical remains are kept.⁵²

Likewise, in the images of Christ in this coat there is an unexpected shift to the grisly and material. Where Repentance is thinking about Christ walking around on earth in a 'secte' of skin he starts thinking about the crucifixion and death of Christ and mentions that he died 'Aboute mydday, when most liht is and mel-tyme of sayntes; | Feddest tho with thy fresshe blood oure forfadres in helle' (7.132-33). Christ's body, that seemingly decorous garment, then becomes a eucharistic meal mentioned with all the gory detail of cannibalism: Christ kindly dies at midday (meal time) so his body is fresh for those consuming it.

⁵¹ In many ways, she resembles a *vierge ouvrante* in these lines. See Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 268, and plate 13. Gibson, *Theater*, p. 144, fig. 6.2. On the outside of these statues, the Virgin is shown nursing the infant Christ; inside, her body is constructed on two hinged panels which part to reveal the Trinity within.

⁵² Caroline Walker Bynum has said that 'Mary is the container (i.e. the womb, the tabernacle, the reliquary) within which rests the body of God' and in 14.86 Mary's body bears a striking similarity to speaking reliquaries (Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 268). See for example: Arm Reliquary of the Apostles, The Cleveland Museum of Art (1930.739), German (Lower Saxony), c.1190. A silver gilt arm with a sleeve depicting the apostles. It contains the *ulna* bone of an unknown saint, *Treasures*, pp. 83-4, catalogue no. 40. Mary here conforms with the church edict that reliquaries were 'the site, not the source, of power', but she forms that site across centuries, giving up her own physicality to do so. Karmen Mackendrick, *Fragmentation and Memory: Meditations on Christian Doctrine* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 111.

He becomes a meal relished by its consumers not because of its spiritual qualities but because of its physical ones. So the coat of Christ's skin doesn't just bleed, it bleeds in a physically involved way: freshly and deliciously. It is ripe for the appreciation of other bodies, and a more complex mingling of flesh and flesh than one consuming the other is hard to imagine. Such eatings resonate throughout the poem in the sensuous and involved ways it describes the eucharist.⁵³ But one particular resonance in terms of Christ's mutually dependent physicality is the most striking; that in which Christ, standing outside Hell arguing with Satan about the souls of the damned, himself asserts that love is his 'drynke' (20.403) and that he will:

drynke of no dische ne of deep clergyse
 Bote of comune coppes, alle cristene soules
 [...]
 Y fauht so me fursteth yut for mannes soule sake:
Sicio.
 May no pyement ne pomade ne precious drynkes
 Moiste me to the fulle ne my furst slokke
 Til the ventage valle in the vale of Iosophat
 And Y drynke riht rype must, *resureccio mortuorum*. (20.405-412)

Christ, like the saints who want to drink his blood at the crucifixion and be saved, wants to drink the souls of men.⁵⁴ And he doesn't want to drink people's souls in a disembodied act of imbibing, where they slip down like ghosts or spirits, he thirsts for their physical effect on him – nothing else will be so moist or will slake his thirst so fully. So Christ also wants to drink all the souls he has set free from Abraham's lap, to make his body comfortable. And in his leap to

⁵³ See 19.90-91.

⁵⁴ See Jill Mann, 'Eating and Drinking in *Piers Plowman*', *Essays and Studies* 32 (1979), 26-43.

earth there is the same eager need that ruffles up the clean divide between spirit and form in his depiction in the poem.

In passus 1 Holy Church describes to Will the ways in which knowledge and love of Truth are innate human quality and as she talks her discourse morphs into a discussion of the nature of love itself, which transforms into Christ:

For Treuthe telleth that loue ys triacle to abate synne
 And most souerayne salue for soule and for body.
 Loue is the plonte of pees, most precious of vertues,
 For heuene holde it ne myghte, so heuy hit semede,
 Til hit hadde of erthe ygoten hitsilue.
 Was neuere lef vppon lynde lyhtere ther-aftur,
 As when hit hadde of the folde flesch and blode taken.
 Tho was hit portatif and persaunt as is the poynt of a nelde;
 May non armure hit lette ne none heye walles. (1.146-54)

In this iteration of the incarnation, Christ hangs from heaven as a heavy load (a liquid then a plant) wanting to take from the earth. In the B text Love cannot be held by heaven until it has 'of the erthe eten his fille' (B.1.154), showing us again the Christ who wants to ravish and consume physical things. In the C text this line changes and gives rise to two variants. In one reading, used here, Christ wants to beget himself on the earth. The use of the reflexive – 'til it hadde of the erthe ygoten hitsilue' – gives Love the character of an eager, self-determining force that wants to be born and is willing to enter into the very human act of begetting to become so. The strange idea of begetting yourself on something else makes the spirit-like quality of Christ before the incarnation clear, as his volition exist before his birth, and it makes his choice seem greater, fuller. He is both wooing the world here, and choosing it for his mother, mating

the thing so he can be born from it. And when he is born/conceived, he is passing through, not just Mary, but the whole 'erthe': and so the physical realm as a whole becomes pregnant with Christ's desire for it. This can also be related to the description of Christ/Love as a 'plonte', a word Cervone points out is alliteratively uninspired until read as a verb and noun and so 'germinates poetically until needed when the metaphor of begetting in the earth two lines later recalls Christ's human flesh generated in the womb of Mary'.⁵⁵ This fecund meddling with matter makes the arrival of Christ in the world a case of a deep admixture of spirit and flesh.

In George Russell and George Kane's edition of the C text, based on Huntington Library MS 143, Love will not be happy until it has 'of erthe yoten hitsilue'.⁵⁶ 'Yoten' has various meanings all centring around the idea of pouring, emitting (bodily fluid), flowing, gushing, sending, releasing, melting: so in this reading Christ's entry to the world can be matched to his status as a medicine.⁵⁷ He is a treacle trickling out of the clouds and onto the world below.

⁵⁵ Cervone, *Poetics*, p. 116.

⁵⁶ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C Version* (London: Athlone, 1997), ed. by George Russell and George Kane, 1.150. See also note to line 150, for variants including 'ȝoten', 'ȝeten', and 'geten': meaning to beget. Skeat has the word 'ȝoten', with this same meaning, to pour. See P. M. Kean, 'Langland on the Incarnation', *Review of English Studies*, 16 (1965), 349-363 (p. 349, n. 7).

⁵⁷ MED, 'yeten', v., 3. See Kean, 'Incarnation', p. 353 for a discussion of the complex of Biblical passages and well-known exegesis that make the image of the Holy Spirit as an unction widely available to medieval writers – and her reading of 'yoten' as directly relevant to these. She describes, as one possible source, Richard of St. Victor's, *de IV Gradibus Violentae Caritatis* where: 'the liquefaction of the soul [...] is made part of the *imitatio Christi*' (p. 353). She disputes D. W. Robertson and Bernard Huppé's argument that Langland is referring specifically to John 2: 27 by way of Bede as unnecessarily limited in scope: it is clear Langland is being imaginatively influenced by a large range of texts and ideas. See D. W. Robertson and Bernard Huppé, *'Piers Plowman' and the Scriptural Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 46 and Kean, 'Incarnation', p. 350.

This reading unifies a series of biblical images used in exegesis to describe the incarnation as an uncomplicated meeting of matter and spirit: the pouring of liquid love onto the ready flesh of the world. So, in a variant of the poem's words, we find a playful combination of the idea of Christ falling on Mary as do 'dew drops from heaven' (Isaiah 45:8) – traditionally associated with the incarnation – with the idea of Christ ravishing the world by taking flesh and blood from it: 'when hit hadde of the folde flesh and blode taken'.⁵⁸ But the idea of dew falling, and the cleanness this invokes, is here very much embedded in the line, and shows how Langland grapples with images of Christ's enfleshment as him passing across the folds (cloth) of the earth like water, and others of him eating and penetrating it. Hugh of St Cher's reading of Psalm 72:6 – 'He shall come down like rain upon the fleece; and as showers falling gently upon the earth' – finds that 'The fleece is appropriate' as a figure for the Virgin's womb 'because it is immune to carnal lusts – having been removed from the body'.⁵⁹ And this indicates the extent to which some commentators wished to see this process as pure. Ben Smith argues that this image has influenced Langland:

The specific figure of the dew falling on the fleece of Gedeon is such a medieval commonplace that it probably underlines Langland's figure directly. Such a probability is augmented by the equation made both by Hugh of St. Cher and in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, for example, between the fleece and Christ's 'clothing', the flesh and blood of his human nature. When Langland says, 'And whan it haued of this folde . flesshe and blode taken', *folde* has a primary meaning of 'earth'.

⁵⁸ Ben H. Smith, *Imagery*, pp. 21-23, 25. For how these lines relate to exegetical tradition in which Hugh of St. Cher calls Christ *tyriaca*, ME *triacle*.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Imagery*, p. 26.

However, *folde* can just as easily mean 'a piece of cloth'. Langland's awareness of the traditional comparison between the flesh and blood of the incarnation is established, for example, in Passus V, line 495: 'And sith with thi self sone . in owre sute deydest'.⁶⁰

Seemingly caught up in this line is the image of Mary decorously enfolding Christ with her untrammelled flesh. But this reading is clearly insufficient. Christ is doing more than flowing over the earth and being enfolded in it as with silk. When he takes flesh and blood from the earth, he extracts from it those grisly things 'ymedled togyderes' by God. And in the whole movement of the passage it is the paradoxical weight of his spirit (the characteristic of matter) that draws him towards an earth that frees him of weight, that attribute of thingness and being.

Conclusion

In regarding the incarnation, Langland is looking at the master metaphor for the arrival of the abstract in the world: the enfleshment of the Word. He seeks at times to understand it poetically as a clean interaction between spirit and a flesh that is spotless and without physical attributes, as the ball rattling around inside the cage of the body. But his mind returns again and again to images of an exciting mutuality, of Christ's spirit as engulfing and transforming the world like flame and being transformed by it. And this way of seeing the incarnation sits alongside the approach he has to the arrival of meaning in

⁶⁰ Smith, *Imagery*, p. 27.

personification. He does not see people as capable of signifying the things personifications signify in a clean and direct fashion. So he does not see meaning arrive in the world in this way. For Langland the world is not a book with meanings legible behind it in perfect latency for the one who can read. It is a messy place where physical things change, convert and undermine abstract ideas, consistently showing that there can be no thought that is not centred in bodily experience.

Christ became embodied to experience human life fully and to appreciate the physical resonances that give the ability to represent meaning. Personification is revealed – through its similarity to the incarnation in the poem – as the arrival of words in a matter that gives them resonance. The bodies of personifications in the poem are not elegantly separable from the words they signify but involved with them in disgusting ways. In translations of the abstract and eternal into particular flesh a messy mixing occurs. The word relies on a body it burns in a meddling union in which both are altered.

Chapter Two

'Y dihte me derely': Allegorical Clothing

Medieval theorists used clothing as a figure through which to understand textual signification as a dressed body that could be stripped by the correct reader to reveal the meaning hidden beneath.¹ The entire extent of the text therefore, if we think in a medieval fashion, can be understood as a cloth.²

Numerous readers of allegory have argued that the form should not be viewed as a puzzle to be decoded but as a beautiful surface on which the attention of the reader should dwell.³ *Piers* has been discussed as an allegory that should be

¹ See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University Wisconsin Press, 1989); Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 190; Michael Camille, 'The Book as Flesh and Fetish in Richard de Bury's *Philobiblon*', in *The Book and the Body*, ed. by Dolores Warwick and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 34-77 (p. 35). See also Giovanni Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth books of Boccaccio's Genealogia Deorum Gentilium in an English Version with Introductory Essay and Commentary*, trans. by Charles G. Osgood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930) where he discusses the moment of inspiration: 'This fervour of poesy [...] adorns the whole composition with unusual interweaving of words and thoughts; and thus it veils the truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction' (14.7, p. 39) see also n. 8, p. 157; Isidore associates poetry with weaving: *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8.7.3, p. 383.

² See R. Howard Bloch, 'Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère', *Yale French Studies*, 70 (1986), 81-99; and *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), for Bloch 'the subject of [fabliaux] is 'the nature of poetry itself' (*Scandal*, p. 19).

³ See David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975); Maureen Quilligan, 'Allegory, Allegoresis, and the Deallegorisation of Language: The *Roman de la Rose*, the *De planctu naturae*, and the *Parlement of Foules*', in *Allegory, Myth and Symbol*, ed. by Bloomfield, pp. 163-187; Masha Raskolnikov, *Body*, p. 5; Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue that all texts should be read in this way in 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108 (2009), 1-21, 'as much as our objects of study may conceal structures that give rise to them, they also wear them on their sleeves' (p. 18).

interpreted in this way.⁴ Pursuing this theme, one could say that allegory is like a beautiful coat enticing the reader to rest her eyes on its surface and not to think about the body beneath. However, Langland is interested in the body and in its relationship – through personification – with words. He therefore insistently brings the bodies in *Piers Plowman* to the foreground, focussing his attention on their experiences and using them to think through his own terms. *Piers* urges its readers to think about the struggles between bodies and words that take place in the form. In this chapter I will argue that *Piers* does not present the reader with an enticing surface as it is not an allegory purely about language. I will make this claim through examining Langland's descriptions of the clothes covering the bodies of his personifications. As other allegorists less concerned with the body litter their texts with signs, Langland has a spartan approach to placing things on bodies. Instead he favours representations of bodies that allow them to create and display physical meanings. In this way his allegory presents a clear link between embodiment and signification. There are no signs or layers of integument between the two. Instead he explores how meanings arise from suffering, sex, lineage, and (in the case of the incarnation) deeply physical touch. This attitude to clothes, I will argue, becomes central to Langland's poem. As a corollary, a marked distrust of clothes emerges. In his love of the body, Langland sees all clothing as untruthful and he begins to make

⁴ Mary Carruthers observes that, '[a]n allegory conducted in personification [...] is an allegory wedded to language; it can have no meaning beyond that created by the conceptual boundaries of the words it personifies. Personification is narrative made up entirely of *littera*, of language itself; it is thus the obvious tool for exploring the nature and limitations of human language' (*The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in 'Piers Plowman'* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 40).

bold claims for the levels of untruth clothing can achieve. When clothes do signify, they have meanings that are themselves socially false: empty pilgrimage, false religion, feminine extravagance, sinfulness, and crossdressing.

In medieval allegory cloth, props, and accessories litter the bodies of personifications to make their verbal meanings clear.⁵ The strange appearances of many of the figures thus dressed could only work in the context of personification and are sensible only after they have been glossed.⁶ But, rather than revealing the flesh beneath a layer of integument, such personifications give the reader the impression that their bodies are immaterial – even non-

⁵ For example, Penance in Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* carries a mallet in one hand, switches in another and a broom in her mouth, *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode: Translated Anonymously into Prose from the First Recension of Guillaume de Deguileville's Poem 'Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine'*, ed. by Avril Henry, EETS o.s. 288 (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), ll. 1095-1101. All further references will be to this edition and will be indicated by line numbers in the text. See Mann, 'Langland and Allegory', pp. 28-29. In the *Roman de la Rose*, Poverty (ll. 448-51), Idleness (ll. 566-570), the God of Love (ll. 874-889), Wealth (ll. 1050-1105), Openness (l.1219) and Shame (ll. 3562-64) can all be identified through clothing. In *Wynnere and Wastoure*, the king has birds embroidered into his tunic and mantel (each with a small blue garter), *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, ed. by Warren Ginsberg (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1992), ll. 90-98, p. 16; The Knight in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* wears black to identify himself with the losing side of the game of chess he plays with Fortune his lady, White, has brilliant white skin that bears few marks of her anatomy – itself a type of clothing, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 457, 939-948, pp. 336, 341. All the characters in the mid-fifteenth-century play *Wisdom* wear clothes designated by complex stage directions, e.g. *Anima* wears black and white that *Wisdom* glosses as sin and reason (ll. 149-156), *The Macro Plays*, ed. by Mark Eccles, EETS o.s. 262 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 114-152.

⁶ Deguileville's Penance glosses her own appearance: her mallet is to break and bruise the heart; the broom sweeps away dirt from the mouth – which is the gate from which sin exits the body (ll. 1110-1240). The narrator of the text talks about the strangeness of Penance's broom – 'if anoother hadde holden it so, men wolden haue holden hire for out of wit' (l. 1100) – acknowledging the fact that only a personification could look so unusual.

existent.⁷ The layer of dress that carries their meaning does the work of signification for them without bodies being relevant to the text.⁸ In Langland's allegory, however, where the question of embodiment is central, this is not the case. *Liberum Arbitrium*, describing the appearance of Charity, makes the poem's attitude towards outward signification clear: 'By clothyng ne by carpyngne knowe shaltow hym neuere | Ac thorw werkes thow myhte wyte wher-forth he walketh' (16.341-42).⁹ Charity's journey is a physically involved series of works that makes his speech and dress (two central ways in which personifications can show meaning) unimportant. Bodies cannot be left out of an attempt to convey meaning. Clothing is supplementary to representation: clothes echo, adorn, and intimate the body but will always be at an apparent remove from it.¹⁰ Where other allegories seem happy to assume a meaningful link between personified figures and the things they wear, Langland disrupts it; clothes in *Piers Plowman* only ever obscure the body.

Piers is more concerned with relating the realness of embodied experience than with the creation of a consistent allegorical cloth. This would

⁷ I think this is true even of allegorical figures whose bodies are described as conveying their meaning. Unlike the socialised and realistic figures that appear in *Piers*, figures like Sadness in the *Rose* and Gluttony in the *Pèlerinage*, who both attack their bodies, do so in a manner that does not consider them as real in the same way Langland considers the bodies of his personifications real. They are statically represented, while Langland enters the changes to his personifications' bodies into a continuum of shame and consequence (Gluttony's hangover, Envy's desire for surgery).

⁸ Tuve discusses how manuscript illustration evolved a way of depicting the four virtues in which their attributes were depicted as decorative objects. See Tuve, *Imagery*, pp. 57-76, fig. 17 (p. 74).

⁹ Charity is easy-going about his clothes: 'as glad as a gounne of a gray russet | As a cote of cammaca or of clene scarlet' (6.300-1).

¹⁰ See Jacques Derrida, '... That Dangerous Supplement ...' in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 76-109.

rest across the body but not reveal it and the poem is happy to allow the physicality of the body to disrupt the surface of its poetry. Langland does not engage in the kind of ordered and controlled creativity that sees clothes and accessories as clear ways of revealing who personifications are. He sees bodily decoration as an unhelpful excess. Clothes only ever signal wrongdoing. If a person has eaten the seed of *Spiritus temperancie*, he writes, 'Sholde no curious clothe comen on his rugge' (21.287). This 'curious cloth' is absent from his temperate personifications who practice simplicity of meaning and so are associated with the physically transformative food of this virtue. Excessive dress only appears where it does not express the truth.

Pilgrim's Clothes

The pilgrim encountered by the recently shriven people on the road to Truth wears a curious litter of signs that do not create their intended meanings. He is covered in things from the holy places he has visited, and other explicit signs of pilgrimage.

He bar a bordoun ybounde with a brood liste,
 In a wethewynde wyse ywrithe al aboute.
 A bolle and a bagge a bar by his syde;
 An hundret of aunpolles on his hat seten,
 Signes of Syse and shelles of Galys,
 And many a crouch on his cloke, kayes of Rome,
 And the vernicle bfore for men sholde yknowe

And se by his signes wham a soughte hadde. (7.162-169)¹¹

The pilgrim himself stipulates the relationship between the things he is wearing and what they should mean: 'Ye may se be the signes that sitten on my cappe | Y haue souht gode seyntes for my soule helthe' (7.174-75). But the unity he imagines between his costume and the meaning he wants it to create - health for his soul - is immediately broken by the people's question of where they can find the shrine and body of St Truth (7.177-78). Mention of a physical body within a shrine (rather than an object taken from one) befuddles the pilgrim and he answers:

'Nay, so me god helpe [...],
I saw neuere palmere with pyk ne with scrippe
Axen aftur hym, but now in this place.' (7.179-181)

This lack of understanding of Truth gives the lie to his elaborate costume. There is nothing beneath his clothes that gives him the authority to speak the truth; his soul is unhealthy. Unlike Charity, whose journey is littered with his works, this figure is a husk.¹² He is a sign of the emptiness of signs, expressive of Langland's scepticism about the efficacy of such a pilgrimage as his. As John Burrow puts it 'The Palmer is pure grotesque, embodying everything Langland most hated in the pilgrims of his day - the worldliness, the meaningless rigmarole of the place-names and keepsakes, and above all the bland

¹¹ Chaucer's Pardoner is another pilgrim who wears numerous signs of the places he has been. He has a vernicle (CT 1.685), and his numerous false relics are meaningless signs (CT 1.694-700). This is appropriate as he is certainly attempting to convey an invented identity through his fashionable dress.

¹² For discussions of the pilgrim's failure to translate his journey into meaning see Mary Carruthers, *Search*, p. 65; Finke, 63; Raabe, pp. 12-13; John Burrow, 'The Action of Langland's Second Vision', *Essays in Criticism*, 15 (1965), 247-268 (p. 253); Jenkins, 'Frustration', pp. 130-31.

complacency'.¹³

In spite of this, the pilgrim's clothes form an immediately recognisable image of a pilgrim and have been used on the covers of editions of the poem and books about it (fig. 1).¹⁴ His near-emblematic status in such usage suggests the ease with which an image of him denotes the idea of a pilgrimage (an idea associated with the poem as a whole that the quick visual language of a book cover would want to employ).¹⁵ Such signification is a state of representation one would assume would be welcome in an allegorical text as it offers an immediate intimacy between image and connotation. But the failure of meaning behind this apparent visual consistency indicates that lived reality has to be diminished to create such a figure, that is: rather than engage in good works in a community, one goes on a worthless pilgrimage. This is a move the poem opposes. The pilgrim is an illustration of the fact that signs and adornment can easily cover emptiness. It is therefore ironic that his image has been taken as

¹³ Burrow, 'Action', 253.

¹⁴ The image of the pilgrim is in Oxford, Bodleian, MS Douce 104 (fol. 33r). The illustrator reproduces almost every part of the original. The image appears on the cover of B text, ed. Schmidt and Anna Baldwin, *A Guidebook to 'Piers Plowman'* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁵ The illustrator was almost certainly a close reader of the poem so we can safely assume the words of the poem itself created this image of the pilgrim not iconography – a fact that amplifies the irony of his later usage. For details of the illustrator as reader see *Piers Plowman: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Douce 104*, ed. by Derek Pearsall and Kathleen Scott (Cambridge: Brewer, 1992), p. ix; Derek Pearsall, 'Manuscript Illustration of Late Middle English Literary Texts, with Special Reference to the Illustrations of *Piers Plowman* in Bodleian Library MS Douce 104', in *Suche Werkis to Werche, Essays on 'Piers Plowman' in Honour of David C. Fowler*, ed. by Mícheál F. Vaughan (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1993), pp. 191-210 (pp. 193-94); Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Denise Despres, *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The Politics of Book Production in the Douce 'Piers Plowman'* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 42-48; Maidie Hilmo, 'Retributive Violence and the Reformist Agenda in the Illustrated Douce 104 MS of *Piers Plowman*', *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, 23 (1997), 13-48 (p. 13).

emblematic of the poem's emphasis on spiritual pilgrimage, as precisely his function in the poem is to act as a sign of the worthlessness of worldly pilgrimage - and the signs used to indicate this. Though the pilgrim is a perfect image of pilgrimage, Langland uses him instead to indicate that such an image and such a pilgrimage is meaningless. He therefore disrupts the representational consistency of his text - as the misuse of the image from Douce 104 shows. Clothes and adornment, here, again represent deceptiveness. The truth is something quite different, gained only from a complex embodied experience.

As a result of this meeting with the pilgrim, the parameters of pilgrimage in the text shift entirely and the poem focusses on the good works of Piers: the pilgrim 'at the plough' (8.111). Following the failure of dress just discovered Piers surprisingly asserts he will 'parayle me [...] in pilgrimes wyse | And wende with alle tho that wolden lyue in treuthe' (8.56-57). But Piers's pilgrim's costume could not be more different from the one that precedes it. It is, visually, entirely unforthcoming; in it he looks nothing like a pilgrim. He puts on 'clothes of alle kyn craftes,' and:

His cokeres and his coffes, as Kynde Wit hym tauhte,
 And heng his hopur on his hals in stede of a scryppe;
 A buschel of breed-corn brouht was ther-ynne.
 'For Y wol sowen hit mysulf and sethe wol Y wende
 To pilgrimage as palmeres doen, pardon to wynne.
 My plough-pote shal be me pyk-staff and pyche a-to the rotes
 And helpe my coltur to kerue and clanse the forwes. (8.58-65)

Piers wants to be an allegorical figure that signifies like the pilgrim, displaying meaning with his dress. He uses allegorical double-speak - '[m]y plough-potte

shal be me pyk-staff' - to express his belief that his ploughing is pilgrimage. In this section, the poem conflates ploughing and pilgrimage. As Burrow has shown, what first looks like a pause lasting one morning, becomes an account of the entire agricultural year of a medieval commune: 'the life of the half-acre is to be identified with the life of truth'.¹⁶ The text disregards both the rich allegory of the pilgrimage to Truth for the real pilgrimage of the Pilgrim for the simple harvesting.¹⁷ Instead of following the clear path Piers has laid out, the people are led into a labour that becomes a painful site of confusion. In the necessities represented by hunger and the regulated labour of the allegorical year no-one goes on any kind of journey. The double act of working and travelling imagined by Piers through his clothes is subsumed by the needs of the body and the material world and he ends the episode with all thought of pilgrimage lost in the physical travails of farming: '[n]ow is Perkyn and this pilgrimes to the plough faren' (8.112). In the end he is just a ploughman. Piers is beaten by need into reflecting truthfully the clothes he is wearing. Langland signifies that such truth can only be gained through hard bodily labour, and can never be indicated by an accrual of exotic ornaments.

The exit of the neat figurality of the pilgrimage leaves the poem in representative confusion. It has descended from high allegory to social realism and, at the entry of the pardon, questions arise as to whether texts can ever have effective meanings. But this is the style it prefers. Langland would rather

¹⁶ Burrow, 'Action', 255-57 (p. 258).

¹⁷ Mann, 'Langland and Allegory', pp. 27-29, 'the metaphor dissolves back into reality' (p. 29).

interrogate his own form than use it to cover over what is confusing in experience. As a result the poem ejects the pilgrim for his myopia and subjects the body to a fierce encounter with the world that leaves it only able to use clothes in the simplest, practical manner. Piers finally establishes the fact the pilgrim was trying to deny: that complex statements made through clothing are false. Embodied experience proves this to be so. The ploughing is an expression that material reality is the only place from which meaning can be gleaned.

In comparison with another fourteenth-century allegory, the first recension of Guillaume de Deguileville's *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* (1330-31; anonymously translated into Middle English prose c. 1430), the unusual nature of Langland's approach to clothes becomes clearer. In Deguileville's poem there is an accurate relationship between clothes and concepts. And this accuracy is steadily preserved to the extent that the body is literally left out. The consistency of meaning between clothes and the truth is visible in the first section: the Dreamer can put on the apparel of a pilgrim only after he has received the sacraments. Langland's empty pilgrim reflects a different cultural moment in the late fourteenth century, in which pilgrimage was viewed with distrust. An early fourteenth-century poet, Deguileville is not sceptical about pilgrimage, and the depiction of his pilgrim celebrates the accessories of pilgrimage to the extent that the body is made irrelevant by them. The sacraments are upheld in the truthfulness of what follows. The satchel Deguileville's pilgrim is given is richly decorated:

Be scrippe was of greene selk, and heeng bi a greene tissu. Lysted it was

wel queyntliche with xii belles of siluer.¹⁸ Whosoeuere forged hem, a good maister he was, for eche of hem was enameled, and in eche anemalure þer was propre scripture. (1835-1839)

Nine bells feature articles of the Creed and three bells represent the Trinity:

these are so nearly joined that 'þei seemden [alle ben] oon' (1845-46). The satchel is decorated with the blood of Saint Stephen and other martyrs (1954, 1960-62).

The *burdoun* or staff is made of 'tre of Sethim' (1869), the acacia wood used as material for the ark of the covenant,¹⁹ and a mirror on the pommel reflects the heavenly city of Jerusalem (1870-76) below which a shining carbuncle (1878-80) illuminates 'alle þilke þat beth in derknesse' (2024-25): Christ and the Virgin (2009, 2020). The satchel is named 'Foy' by Grace Dieu (1890) and the staff 'Esperance' (2002).

Grace Dieu next gives the pilgrim the armour of virtue.²⁰ The dreamer cannot physically wear it. He is too fat for the doublet of patience (2139-41) so Grace Dieu advises him to keep it on as it will wear him down like a carpenter planes wood (2151-52): 'þou must muste confoorme þe to it, not it to pee' (2143-44). When he puts on the helmet of temperance and gorger of sobriety – which are meant to deaden the senses – he is made blind, mute, loses his sense of smell, and is deafened and choked (2470-2478). The gloves of

¹⁸ See Guillaume de Deguileville's *The Pilgrimage of Human Life*, trans. by Eugene Clasby (New York: Garland, 1992): '[t]he color green was believed to have the power to refresh the eye and to sharpen the vision' (p. 199, n. 97).

¹⁹ See *Pilgrimage*, trans Clasby, n. 95, p. 199.

²⁰ See *Pèlerinage*, ed. Henry, p. xviii for a succinct list of the different pieces of armour: the doublet of patience; the habergeon of force; the helmet of temperance; the gorger of sobriety; the gloves of continence in deed and will; the sword of justice; the scabbard of humility; the sword-girdle of perseverance; the shield of prudence.

continence are too rough for his smooth hands (2480-81). Essentially, this episode displays how the sensual needs of the body are suppressed by the armour to arrest sin. And what emerges from its amusing lines – the dreamer ends saying 'alle þese armures han frushed me and pressed me and defouled me' (2589-90) – is a gleeful sense of a poet describing a body locked into enclosing and disabling garments. He admits it cannot meet the high standards of the armour and so fantasizes about how a bodiless spirit would fit into it better. When the dreamer meets Reason she explains to him the extent to which the body is an obstacle 'gret and thikke' (3338) to his understanding and ability to wear the armour. So he asks her to release him from its burden:

And þanne Resoun sette hond to me and I putte me in hir baundoun. She drowh and I shof. So miche we dide, she and I, þat þe contracte was ouerthrowe fro me and I vncharged. Whan vntrussed þus I was I was rauished into þe eyr an hygh. Me thouht I fleih, and þat nothing I weyede. At my wille oueral I wente, and up and down, and fer I seyh. Nothing in þe world (as me thouhte) was heled ne hid fro me. Gladed I was gretliche [...] wel I seigh my bodi þat it was dunge, and to preise it was nothing. [...] It was nouht, I seigh it wel. Fy on him, and on alle hise [doinges]. (3348-3355, 3358-59, 3366-67)

The spirit is imagined as a thing bestowing perfect freedom and enjoyment on whoever can live without a body. Reason admits that the armour will weigh almost nothing without the body but that the dreamer needs to adopt it again to gain merit from wearing it (3381-82). The perfect life is one that struggles on with the body, seeking to grind it down into material correspondence with what it has on.

In this Guillaume is very different from Langland. Where Langland is also anxious about the failings of the body he does not encase it in rigid

garments; he puts the garments aside and explores its needs. Guillaume's armour proscribes one meaning for the flesh and when it fails to achieve this he imagines leaving it behind altogether. In this way the *Pèlerinage* enshrines the detailed and minute meaning it ascribes to garments. When the body presents trouble to these meanings it is told to conform, or taken away. Langland, of course, cannot omit the bodily from his poem in this way; when it doesn't conform its needs are explored until the meaning is removed from clothes.

The Misleading Cloth of Poetry

Clothed expressions of untruthfulness in the poem begin with the dreamer himself. His first action (the first in the poem) is to dress in a manner that gives him a false identity: 'Y shope me into shroudes as Y a shep were; | In abite as an heremite vnholý of werkes' (Pr.2-3).²¹ This dressing conveys serious problems with his character around which the poem unfolds; foremost of which are his aspirations to the spiritual benefits of a life he does not lead. This kind of self-investiture becomes a common trope in the poem. Wherever clothes appear so

²¹ Pearsall connects it to the 'wolf in sheep's clothing' of Matt. 7:15 and I agree with this reading, C text, ed. Pearsall, note to Pr.2. Godden's argument rests on the idea that sheep do not resemble the 'russet' robes the dreamer has on in 10.1; though such garments are associated with hermits the length between these descriptions indicates a change in dress that resembles the dreamer's changing quest. See 'Plowmen and Hermits in Langland's *Piers Plowman*', *Review of English Studies*, 235 (1984), 129-163.

do lies and concealment.²²

The synthetic untruthfulness of clothes allows the needs of the body to be consistently emphasised. So when Reason reprimands those who practise sartorial excess he makes clear that clerks 'pelure' and 'palfrayes' should be turned into 'pore menne lyflode' (4.115), and Purnele is told to put aside her 'purfyel' and to keep it in her 'cofre for catel at here nede' (5.128-29).²³

Superfluous clothes materially affect the body as they are the opposite of needful things.²⁴ As soon as they are sold and enter the economy of *lyflode* their pernicious influence ends.²⁵

The bad influence of clothing has a marked effect among doctors, who

²² Covetousness learns how to make cloth literally untruthful by stretching, loosely spinning and weighing wrongly (6.215-224). Meed's acolytes, Guile and Liar, are concealed by clothing when they run from the King's wrath at Westminster. Guile lives amongst merchants who have 'paraylede hym lyke here prentys the peple to serue' (2.227). Liar is taken in by Pardoners who have 'woschen hym and wypeden hym and wonden hym in cloutes' (2.233) and friars who have 'copedden hym as a frere' (2.243). Clothes are untruthful in their manufacture and in what they cover. See Mann, 'Langland and Allegory', pp. 21-23 for analysis of Liar's progress.

²³ Reason says truth will not be loved 'tyl Purnele porfiel be putte in here whicche' (4.111) – another instance of clothes blocking truthful signification. Purnele is a type-name for an over-dressed woman. See T. F. Mustanoja, 'The Suggestive Use of Christian Names in Middle English Poetry', in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies in Honor of F. L. Utley*, ed. by Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), pp. 51-76. Purnele reappears in relation to priests who over spend on clothes: 'Of that that holy churche of the olde law claymeth | Prestes on aparayl and on Purnele now spene' (17.7-72) and is accused of being a 'prestis fyle' by Wrath (6.135). Hers is also the name for over-dressed Pride, whose cross-dressing I discuss below. Another woman misbehaving with clothes is Watte's wife: 'For here hode was worth half-marc and his hoed nat a grote' (5.133).

²⁴ Chaucer's Pardoner is clear that 'superfluitee of clothynge' is expensive and so harms the people (CT 10.416).

²⁵ Richard de Bury shows how women constantly desire the reverse of this good husbandry. Ventriloquising a book complaining of an imagined wife, he writes that she: 'advises that we should speedily be converted into rich caps, sendal and silk and twice-dyed purple, robes and furs, wool and linen' (John de Bury, *Philobiblon*, ed. and trans. by E. D. Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), p. 43; cited by Camille, 'Philobiblon', p. 52).

are singled out as fine dressers.²⁶ Doctors meddle with bodies and so it is apposite that their own bodies are covered with untruthful cloth. The physician killed by Elde has a 'a furred hoed' (22.176) just like the doctor described by Hunger, selling his hood and his 'cloke of Callabre' in times of hardship (8.290-91, again for his *liflode*). Such display clearly marks the distance between doctors' understanding of the body and their medical practices. Hunger attests that doctors only have money because people over-eat. And Fisyk gives a glass helmet (22.172) to a Life afraid of Death and Elde – placing a delicate and expensive thing over a body it will do nothing to help.²⁷ Indeed, doctoring is little more than cover-up. When 'frere Flatrere' becomes 'fiscicien and surgien' (22.315-16) he only does so because he can plaster the wounds of sin gently: a 'remedy' that dresses but fails to heal. Doctors signify bad readings of the body. They do not understand how to treat it and so place veils over it. In this reflex the body is alienated and misread – and therefore damaged, or laid open to damage – by clothes.

Clothes form a barrier to the body's needs in the poem because they do not express what it is. This lack of empathy damages people. Fabrication alarms a poet in love with the corporeal and inspired by it to write. Langland's ability to express bodily experience with accuracy shows what he believes to be lost to untruthful clothes. This is not just an abstract 'truth' (an unholy person in

²⁶ See Rosanne Gasse, 'The Practice of Medicine in Piers Plowman', *Chaucer Review*, 39 (2004), 177-97. Gasse notes the unpopularity of doctors in the poem, comparing their healing to that given by Christ.

²⁷ See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 22.172. A 'glasene houe' is a proverbially useless cure.

religious cloth) but a rich poetic engagement with lived experience. He does not use clothes in allegorical shorthand because he has a gift for describing the body that would be lost were it to be covered over with things. Clothes enable a kind of representative revelation and covering in which we see what is and is not truly felt.²⁸ And Langland's unique poetry emerges in the gaps between the two.

In passus 9 the opposing experiences of the poverty of single mothers and the ease of false beggars covers and reveals bodies beneath outward show.²⁹ Both mislead: the women 'turne the fayre outward' (9.85); the men '[l]ouken loughliche' (9.141). Both have intensely realised private experiences that belie their public lies. The beggar sits in the evening by hot coals so he can:

Vnlouke his legges abrood or ligge at his ese,
 Reste him and roste hym and his rug turne,
 Drynke druie and depe and drawe hym thenne to bedde. (9.143-45)

The single mothers 'soffre muche hunger | And wo in wynter-tymes and wakyng on nyhtes' (9.77-78) as they rise to rock their babies' cradles and perform the piecemeal work that provides their income. Beneath the appearance each individual presents is a body in constant action (*ligge, reste,*

²⁸ See Dinshaw, *Poetics*, p. 41. Dinshaw cites Roland Barthes who describes the pleasure of reading as not in full revelation of facts (a striptease's promised ending) but in the intermittent view of 'skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open necked sweater, the glove and the sleeve)'. I think this evocative description relates to the appearance of the body in *Piers*. See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 10.

²⁹ For analysis of these moving lines see Lawrence M. Clopper, 'Need Men and Women Labour? Langland's Wanderer and the Labor Ordinances', *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. by Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 110-129 (pp. 122-23); G. Shepherd, 'Poverty in *Piers Plowman*', in *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R. H. Hilton*, ed. by T. H. Ashton, and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 169-89.

turne, drynke, drawe; wakyng, rise, rokke, carde, kembe, wasche) and sensual engagement (*roste; hunger*) that translates its experience into emotion (*ese; wo*). The beggars' *legges* and his *rug* come into focus as do the mouth and belly of the mother while she is 'afyngred and afurste' (9.85). Both bodies are realised by Langland looking at their actions, what they feel inwardly, the psychological effect of their sensations, and at particular limbs and body parts. The effect of the lines indicates a poet engaging a strongly affective will with his own felt experience to force himself (as much as readers) into an imaginative understanding of the experience of others. There is the impression of a desire to look beneath social forms and describe lived experience. Langland is surprised by the force of his poetic invention. After detailing the single mothers' pain he writes that it is 'reuthe [...] to rede or in ryme shewe | The wo of this wommen that wonyeth in cotes' (9.82-83) as though he realises how far he has gone in exposing them. These women work the menial jobs relating to dress (carding and combing wool, patching, washing, scraping flax, winding yarn) while the beggars are part of a line of 'lewede ermytes' (9.140) met early in the poem in those who '[c]lothed hem in copis to be knowe fram othere | And made himself heremites, here ese to haue' (Pr.54-55). These inverted experiences with dress express the integrity (or lack of) of each character: the women make natural fibres into the fragments of garments while the hermits take the whole cloth. But in each case looking beneath whatever social facade is presented makes an unavoidably insistent body clear, one that demands and displays something very different to the false makeup of fabric. We are made aware of the bodies

that clothing conceals.

Throughout this passus, fragmented body parts form a counterpoint to acts of clothed dissimulation. Truth grants a pardon to those who work with their 'hands' (9.58); 'lorelles' have their 'hele' and here 'ye-syhte' and 'lymes to labory with' (9.102-3); beggars break the bones and backs of their children (9.170) so they are 'mysshape' (9.172); there are the 'blynde and bedredne' who are 'broken in here membres' (9.178); and the workman with no 'wyne in his wombe' (9.254) until he becomes a clerk. This physical patchwork hints at the grisly and felt that lies beneath the dissembling of one who might '[c]ome in his cope as he a clerk were' (9.248) who 'for the cloth that keuereth hym ykald he is a frere' (9.250) or the hermits who have seen friars' fat cheeks and so 'clothed hem in copes, clerkes as hit were' (9.211) and beggars who go forth 'a begyneld wyse' (9.154).

The difference between the physical and the clothed here is certainly that one is felt while the other is artificial. But it is also clear that some are able to manipulate the physical using clothes. The hermit dresses as a clerk and gets a full *womb*, the beggar breaks the limbs of his children to make them sympathetic to his disguise – permanently disfiguring them. Those without disguises (the needy and bedridden) go without aid and die because of the distracting false shows of the beggars and the lack of feeling beneath the clerks' habits. Clothes act on the body in a pernicious cycle of display and created reality. In the same way, the chiaroscuro of social appearance and lived experience sustains the poem – the one influencing the other. We see the ersatz and the true just as we

read moments of diagrammatic allegory (the journey to Truth) among detailed expressions of social experience (the ploughing). And we see how one reflects and creates the other: the desires expressed in the allegory create the confusion in the social realm, just as the concepts and formulations visible in texts regulate how real bodies are understood.

This mixture of concealment and physically immediate experience is also explored in the appearance of Christ in clothes. In an instance where the poem discusses Christ's appearance after the Resurrection, his clothes form a barrier to full perception that can only be traversed through an intimate (and gory) bodily touch. Rechelesnesse describes Christ on the road to Emmaus unrecognised by Cleophas because of 'his pore parail and pilgrimes clothes', saying that 'by clothyng they knewe hym nat, so caytifliche he yede' (12.125, 128). This sense of a clothed deception is present in Christ's appearance in the *humana natura* of Piers, 'his helm and his haberion' (20.22). I have already discussed how Christ's skin can be described as a coat covering his divine spirit. And knightly attire can be understood as a second-skin, a body created by metal akin to skin.³⁰ Christ's apparent deception points to a spirit beneath a misleading cloth of flesh. This is seized upon by the devils of Hell as a means of equating Lucifer's own deceit of man with Christ's, and thus avoiding the necessity to release any souls to him. Satan accuses Lucifer of deceit 'in fourme of an addre' (20.315), but Gobelyne points out, hopefully, that 'as thowe

³⁰ See E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 135-36.

bigyledest godes ymage in goynge of an addre, | So hath god bigiled vs alle in goynge of a weye' (20.326-27). It is crucial to their argument that Christ's walk through earth is seen as a disguise – the adoption of a coat of skin – and not as a true and full human embodiment.

When they come to debate, however, Christ insistently displays the difference between Lucifer's false assumption of shape and his own incarnation.³¹ He refers to himself as fully and complexly human, while accusing Lucifer of merely walking 'in persone of an addere' (20.378). Christ claims of mankind that '[m]yne they were and of me' (20.372), he argues 'we beth brethrene of o bloed' (20.418), and his assertion of the equivalence of original sin and the crucifixion rests on the fullness of his bodily death – he refers to Exodus 21:24:

ho-so hit out a mannes eye or elles his fore-teth
Or eny manere membre maymeth other herteth,
The same sore shal he haue that eny so smyteth:
Dentem pro dente, et oculum pro oculo.
So lyf shal lyf lete ther lyf hath lyf anyented. (20.383-386)

The foundation of his sacrifice is an idea of the equivalence of people's bodies so minute it rests across their eyes and teeth. In his reasoning, Christ's body is the tool with which he has met the demands of the law. Its very real death, suffering, and blood are the material (like eyes and teeth) that pay back the devil. And yet, Christ also playfully admits '*Ars ut artem fallerat*' ('One cunning stratagem in order to defeat another').³² While he has fully and physically

³¹ See Davlin, 'Human Body', 162-164.

³² See C-text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 392a.

adopted a human body, he is still tricking the devil by the assumption of a flesh that hides so much of his true nature.

Christ's paradoxical full yet disguising embodiment is further emphasised when his material body is touched by Thomas, whom Christ has taken 'by the hoende and tauhte hym to grope | And fele with his fyngeres his flescheliche herte' (21.170-71).³³ This passage emphasises the physically miraculous in the incarnation, but it is also an expression of a strong desire on the part of the poet. The bodily immutable Christ – who has returned from death itself – guides the hand of a human into himself right up to his heart, providing a pulsating proof of his body's existence. Such realness is visibly shared with Thomas, who then speaks 'with his tonge' (21.172) and is blessed. Under a misleading guise Christ's body is a physical constant that Langland powerfully imagines as an answer to uncertainty, a proof of faith that speaks with its anatomy. But no such divine or open body exists to answer the questions posed by a world he paints as rich with lies. While bodies represent truth throughout the poem none are as definitive in quashing uncertainty as this, none guide the doubter inside, and none confer their perfect status on other bodies – elevating them all above human forms.

Rather than this, the poem paints a constant and enduring picture of holy

³³ See Davlin, 'Human Body', 164.

men lying through their clothes.³⁴ Their coats become so numerous and so false that the very identity of a clerk, friar, or priest seems to be woven in cloth.

Throwing on the cloak is all that is necessary. The friar who absolves Meed, for example, is 'a confessour ycoped as a frere' (3.38), *Liberum Arbitrium* accuses the 'lettered' of following 'the lecherye of clothing' (16.256), and says priests, preachers, and prelates are 'enblaunched with *bele paroles* and with *bele clothes*' (16.270). Passus 9 is populated with false friars, hermits, and clerks.

When Reason forecasts change among clerks and the church he describes them as being 'clothed newe' (5.179). Beneath these concealments it is hard to find a body with real meaning. The sense is of a religious community so lost to the experience of Thomas they have left their bodies behind – no longer aware of the divine link between their tongues and Christ's heart, their physicality is traded like so much wool between hunting (5.157) and whoring (17.72)

The Dreamer seems at first to be on this same path. His first action in the poem is its first act of untruthfulness. This is one he compounds as he elaborates on his garments. In passus 5, at the start of his confession, he describes himself 'yclothed as a lollare' (5.2). Under these clothes, like other false beggars, he has a healthy body both he and Reason minutely describe

³⁴ The untruthfulness of religious orders is commonly described as resting beneath their clothes. *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede* is obsessed with clothing. For example the grotesque Dominican wears a 'kyrtel of clene whijt' unlike the flesh beneath that quivers like 'a quyke myre', see *The Piers Plowman Tradition: A Critical Edition of 'Pierce the Ploughman's Crede', 'Richard the Redeless', 'Mum and Sothsegger', and 'The Crowned King'*, ed. by Helen Barr (London: Everyman, 1993), ll. 229, 226. In the *Roman de Silence* the queen keeps a male lover who lives with her dressed as a nun, see *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, trans. and ed. by Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), ll. 6531-32. Pope-holiness in the *Rose* is another image of a hypocrite in a habit (ll. 407-440) and False Seeming points directly to the possibilities for deception presented by the religious habit (ll. 1017-18) – among them cross-dressing.

(5.8-9, 13-21) he is not 'broke [...] in body or in membre' nor is he 'ymaymed' (5.33-34). Rather, he likes wearing his 'longe clothes' (5.41) to signify a cleric's life and escape work. He reveals himself through his dress - but only as 'an ydel man' or a 'spille-tyme' (5.28-29) who dresses in the clothes of religion while not fulfilling that, or any other, role. This sartorial display continues with the 'russet' robe of a hermit he wears at the start of the *Vita* (10.1) and his beggar's costume ('[i]n manere of a mendenant') that he wears to the Feast of Patience (15.3). In each case he mimics the style of another whose way of life is a plea for charity while he has made clear he has no real claim to it as he is able to work. Like the pilgrim, clothes only hang on the body of the Dreamer to display spiritual lack. In trying to appear religious, he is only visible as something quite different. In the closing passūs, however, matters start to change. He is shoeless in rough wool as passus 20 opens, still dressed 'ylike' something else – but in this case it is a 'lore' (20.3), an 'idle wastrel', an accurate representation of his character. In passus 21 a transformation has occurred. The dreamer awakes from dreaming: '[a]nd dihte me derely and dede me to kyrke' (21.2). Here we find a person dressing not as something other than he is but enacting the well-known ritual of dressing well for church. Here, clothing the body ends up as a simple act of respectful devotion – it is a process of careful preparation: the act of dressing and not the act of dissembling. In it, the self as a projected identity melts away. Clothes cease to be a screen for lies and become a sign of enacted faith. They do not visually signify but show how a body can act with integrity in relation to adornment. Here, finally, the social use of cloth becomes apparent.

Just so, the act of careful writing is a process of beautiful adornment – not a laying on of the wrong cloth.

Clothes as Feminine Self-Fashioning: Meed and Holy Church

Medieval society was as anxious as allegory about how clothes could remain 'truthful'. But unlike the sensitivities to the body's needs shown by Langland, many ideas seem to have settled around the fear that the body could be materially altered by the clothing it put on; or that clothing could achieve the density of flesh and replace or obscure it altogether. Clothing was seen as intimately related to the flesh beneath; it was therefore used as a way of controlling that flesh. Metaphors of reading that I have already mentioned – which saw the text as a sartorial covering to a physically solid interpretation – had no doubts that the body beneath could be revealed to the initiated and therefore that the surface had to be logically coherent in relation to it; or that it could be manipulated by reading into another flesh.³⁵ In asserting as much, theorists showed how confident they were in their readings of texts and clothes

³⁵ Boccaccio writes that 'fiction [...] pleases the unlearned by its external appearance, and exercises the minds of the learned with its hidden truth; and thus both are edified and delighted with one and the same perusal' (Poetry, 14.14, p. 51). Richard of Bury discusses 'a remedy by which to entice the wanton minds of man by a kind of pious fraud, the delicate Minerva secretly lurking behind an image of pleasure' (*Philobiblon*, ch. 1, sec. 180, cited by Dinshaw, *Poetics*, p. 21). Macrobius cites the dream of the philosopher, who is confronted by the Eleusinian Goddesses outside a brothel: a state they have been reduced to by his revelation of their secrets, Numenius Ambrosii Theodisii Macrobiani, *Comentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, ed. by J. Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), 7-8, cited by R. Howard Bloch in 'Silence and Holes', 95; St Jerome's description of the transformation of a pagan bride (read: text) by washing and re-dressing forms the basis of much of Dinshaw's interpretation of Chaucer's feminine poetics. See Dinshaw, *Poetics*, pp. 22-25.

and how they felt that what they saw on the surface would naturally relate to what was beneath. The necessity of unity between body and cloth was relevant to the natural world.³⁶ Sumptuary laws displayed a belief in the correctness of the correspondence between the bodies of the wearers and the clothes they wore – and the ease with which this could be controlled.³⁷ Anxiety abounded that the wrong clothes would transform the wearers' bodies until they became the right clothes: one French chronicler complains that peasants, during celebrations of victory after the Battle of Bouvines (1214), 'have only to obtain a suit of clothes beyond their station to become convinced that their *beings* have been transformed'.³⁸ In rituals such as coronations – where dress and tokens accrue on the body of the new monarch – clothes have been read as the means by which the new identity of the person has been forged.³⁹ The body, in such accounts, becomes an insignificant thing to be altered and regulated by the cloth

³⁶ Nature in the *Pèlerinage* claims the earth is made of her robes, and that she clothes it in spring, she describes clothing each tree and destroying its garments in winter, ll. 847-88. In the *Rose*, the earth dresses herself with the beauties of nature, ll. 59-66. In Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*, the earth (as a man) clothes himself after the nakedness of winter, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 591, F. 129. See Burns, pp. 152-55; Bloch, *Scandal*, pp. 40-42; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communalities, Pre- and Postmodern* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), n. 56, p. 272.

³⁷ The exercise of power to force people into minutely stipulated obedience is comparable to the structure of an allegorical text where personifications reflect their names in detailed costumes. These rules were underlined with heavy fines and enforcement that advocated informing within communities. Gifts were regulated to stop inferior social positions being covered with rich cloth. See Sarah-Grace Heller, 'Anxiety, Hierarchy, and Appearance in Thirteenth-Century Sumptuary Laws and the *Roman de la rose*', *French Historical Studies*, 27 (2004), 311-348 (pp. 319-320; Tables 1, 2; and pp. 325-328).

³⁸ Guillaume le Breton, *Gesta Philippi augusti*, in *Recueil des Histoires de France*, vol. 17, 16 ff. Quoted in Baudrillart, *Histoire de luxe privé et public*, 3: 167. Cited by Burns, p. 32, her translation (and emphasis).

³⁹ Burns discusses the coronation of Louis IX in which the archbishop gives him 'ring, crown, sword, and sceptre, as well as specific items of royal dress [...] Here the king, literally dressed by the archbishop, is figuratively made by him as well, fashioned out of the visible vestments of his office' (p. 31).

placed across it. Just as the body disappears in images of some personifications – or is altered by armour – the sense that its social meaning can depend entirely on what it wears arises (Nature, for example, changes seasons when she changes her dress). This type of physical mutability is unwelcome in Langland's world view – for him the body itself expresses truths.

In other moralistic literature, women's bodies are seen as dangerously irrelevant to their elaborate self-decoration.⁴⁰ Works that discuss apparently excessive details of dress denigrate the body beneath and are even fearful about whether it is there.⁴¹ For Langland this is an active poetic fear and where the body does seem to slip away from the text under a cover of cloth this expresses his deepest unease about physical uncertainty. Unlike in the *Pèlerinage* where meaning is finally secured by the exit of the body, and by its adjustment to clothing, attire in *Piers* is only approvingly related where it is a benign reflection of the physical. When it starts to assert power it is highly unwelcome.

Meed is a personification who encapsulates this fear. Her layers of integument lead the poem through a crisis in relation to meaning that is reflected in the dazzling clothes she enters the poem wearing:

⁴⁰ Women's finery is proverbially understood as covering a bodiless void: 'Women's gowns are so long and so interwoven with dissimulation that one cannot discern what lies beneath' (Maurice Maloux, *Dictionnaire des proverbes, sentences, et maximes* (Paris: Larousse, 1980), p. 192; cited and translated by Burns, p. 41). In the *Rose*, the Jealous Husband asserts that his wife's body is like a dunghill covered in silk robes (8912-15). Burns and Dinshaw see feminine dress-making – both wearing and making clothes – as linked to acts of self-definition. Chaucer's Wife of Bath, a clothier, dresses and speaks for herself, Dinshaw, *Poetics*, pp. 113-117. Burns describes how numerous courtly women assume a subject position through what they do with dress, pp. 59-65.

⁴¹ The *Contenance des fames* observes that a woman's body is 'made out of clothes themselves' (*Three Medieval Views of Women*, trans. and ed. by Gloria K. Fiero, Wendy Pfeffer, and Mathé Allain (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 86-104. Cited by Burns, pp. 54-55).

Y lokede vppon my luft half as the lady me tauhte
 And say a womman as hit were wonderly yclothed.
 She was purfiled in pelure, non puyrere on erthe,
 And crouned with a croune, the kyng hath non bettre;
 On alle here fyue fyngeres ful richeliche yrynged
 And thereon rede rubies and othere riche stones.
 Here robynge was rychere then Y rede couthe,
 For to telle of here atyer no tyme haue y nouthe;
 Here aray with here rychesse raueschede my herte. (2.8-16)

Almost no part of Meed's body is empty of decoration. Her head, each of her five fingers, and her body drip with jewels, robes and furs. Faced with this excess the narrator follows the romance trope of denying his ability to describe the richness of her clothing – a change from the B text's longer description.⁴² This in itself signals the opposition of cloth to meaningful words: they are not relevant to language, not what it should be used to describe.

Meed's self-definition in apparel answers the fears of moralists who saw women as creating bodies of cloth alone. The Dreamer quite clearly states that her 'aray with here rychesse raueschede my herte' (2.16); Meed's body is not in question here: the Dreamer wants her dress.⁴³ This deflective strategy on Meed's part can be glossed in relation to my comments about her physicality in Chapter 1. Knowing the effect her body has on her meaning (it is profligate), Meed has constructed a reflective armour that turns viewers away from what she does

⁴² See B text, ed. Schmidt, 2.13-16.

⁴³ See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 2.16. Compare this with the Jealous Husband in the *Rose*, who wants to have sex with his wife's clothes rather than her body. He expresses frustration with the fact that he cannot enjoy her clothes in bed as she hangs them up carefully on her pole before joining him (ll. 8876-8881) and imagines this is what her suitors are doing (ll. 9257-9264). See Burns, pp. 44-51.

with it. The jewels sparkle in their eyes.⁴⁴ In this way she constructs an allegorical meaning for herself that omits the physical and focusses on the rich rewards she offers. Between lines 12 and 16 derivations of 'rich' (*richeliche, riche, rychere, rychesse*) proliferate. She has woven a text around herself that has only one meaning. For Meed, that meaning is rich reward. However, as with other personifications that try to use cloth to create meaning - the meaning she eventually displays runs counter to her intention. Her attire in the poem, through its richness, signals feminine viciousness and sexual profligacy.

Holy Church is indignant about Meed's appearance. Her first words about her attack the material consistency of her garb with details of her lack of truthfulness. She has lied against Loyalty, Holy Church's lover, and argued against Holy Church in court (2.19-21). But as well as being untruthful (like the pilgrim) her body is irregular and misbegotten: she is the bastard of Deceit (2.24). Holy Church drives her point home in an appeal to natural imagery – 'For shal neuer breere bere berye as a vine | Ne on a croked kene thorn kynde fyge wexe' (2.28-29) – that emphasises the inevitability of inheritance. She positions Meed as the physical offshoot of a bad tree. The only way for her to grow well would be unnatural. Therefore her material being (what she has inherited from her father) is bad. Holy Church thus peels away the cloth to show Meed's body and, as she does this, reveals her own: '[t]he fader that me

⁴⁴ Meed wears rubies, which in the *Pèlerinage* are described as shining out – Grace Dieu is covered with rubies and stars (ll. 158-163) and a carbuncle on the pilgrim's staff signifies Mary: both shine out in the darkness (ll. 1878-80). Wealth in the *Rose* has a carbuncle on her golden circlet that can illuminate the world at night for a half a league (ll. 1096-1101). Meed's jewellery employs the allegorical tradition in which shining red jewels are positive and reverses it.

forth brouhte *filius dei* he hoteth' (2.31). Her own figure 'in lynnene yclothed' (1.3) is an image of representative restraint. The simplicity of her dress suggests nothing – leaving the extraordinary depth of her significance (as Christ's offspring) in her patrimony and therefore in her body.

Holy Church makes no attempt to display her definition through clothing, instead placing her physical consistency in a central position in the poem. She is unlike women in other texts who personify morally correct characteristics through elaborate dress.⁴⁵ In doing so she poses a problem to the illustrator of MS Douce 104. How to illustrate a figure that has no striking visual characteristics? Don't. The artist has been established as a reader of the poem and his faithful adherence to the text means he omits all personifications like Holy Church that have no notable visual characteristics.⁴⁶ He does, however, provide four separate illustrations of Meed that form a kind of fashion parade. In each illustration Meed wears a different outfit. And each change of dress in some way reflects her change of situation: she enters the poem crowned, dressed in an ermine robe and carrying golden chalices (fig. 2);⁴⁷ travelling to

⁴⁵ Grace Dieu in the *Pèlerinage* wears a dress of gold thread and a green sash decorated with rubies, she has an enamel brooch with a star in the centre and a crown decorated with stars (ll. 120-126). Reason in the *Rose* has the extraordinary regularity of her appearance praised, her eyes are like shining stars and she is crowned (ll. 2969-2982).

⁴⁶ See n. 15 for further details of this manuscript and work that proves the artist's close attention to textual detail. This is very unusual; most illustrators employed conventional iconographies. See Pearsall, 'Manuscript Illustration', pp. 193-94; Lesley Lawton, 'The Illustration of Late Medieval Secular Texts, with Special Reference to Lydgate's *Troy Book*', in *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Studies*, ed. by Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), pp. 41-69; M. Alison Stones, 'Secular Manuscript Illumination in France', in *Medieval Manuscripts and Textual Criticism*, ed. by Christopher Kleinhenz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 83-102, esp. pp. 95-96; Kathleen Scott, *Tradition and Innovation in Later Medieval English Manuscripts* (London: British Library, 2007), p. ix.

⁴⁷ She gives out '[c]oupes of clene gold, coppes of syluer' at 3.23.

Westminster her dress is simpler (and she only carries one chalice) but she has adopted a fashionable and courtly way of dressing her hair (fig. 3);⁴⁸ when she arrives at Westminster she is in chaste white, but her clothes have become more fashionable with the addition of a padded headdress (a *bourrelet*) and matching cuffs (fig. 4);⁴⁹ receiving absolution from a visibly hypocritical friar (3.38-54) she is dressed simply again, with a crown of flowers in her hair (fig. 5).⁵⁰ In these illustrations, Meed is speaking through her clothes. She ends the series looking almost virginal as she is falsely absolved and throughout her appearances at court she is depicted as a canny political player: matching apparent innocence with knowing modishness. Depicting her use of clothes in her different situations is an insight of the illustrator's that matches Langland's obvious textual concerns. Meed's body is a screen across which different sartorial identities cross. She is mercurial and extravagant in her use of cloth. She is not interested in her physical being. She is not an image of pure physical femininity like Holy Church, but a sign of feminine mutability and corruption. This is very unwelcome in Langland's text. He favours personifications with a physical consistency beneath dress that makes its details unnecessary. Instead, Meed is in

⁴⁸ She wears hairnets on either side of the face, a similar style to one popular in thirteenth-century France that Gilles d'Orléans's, in a 1273 sermon, described as 'signs of Hell – horns and dead hair, which could have come from someone who was perhaps in Hell or Purgatory'. Margaret Scott, *Medieval Dress and Fashion* (London: British Library, 2009), p. 72. For an example of this style on an illustrated figure believed to be Eleanor of Castile from the *Alphonso Psalter*, England, c. 1281-4 see pp. 70-71, fig. 41 (British Library, Add. MS 24686, f. 13v).

⁴⁹ For details of this garment see Margaret Scott, *Dress*, p. 129 and figs 76, 78.

⁵⁰ This makes her resemble Alceste and the God of Love in the *Legend of Good Women* (F.242) and Idleness (ll. 555-56), and Diversion (ll. 827-29), and the God of Love (ll. 892-93) in the *Rose*.

the tradition of women who use clothes to create their identity - her care for her looks is a signal that she feels she can remake herself through dress and has no thought for the correctness of the body beneath.⁵¹ As such, she can be read consistently: as a woman whose sartorial display signals the dangers of femininity. As with all clothes in this poem, Meed's dress only indicates that she is false.

⁵¹ The Old Woman in the *Rose* who instructs Fair Welcoming on the best way to attract lovers: through dress. She informs him that the ugliest should wear the best clothing (ll. 13285-86), that women should cover their hands (ll. 13327-32) or wear wigs (ll. 13287-13301), that they should paint their faces (ll. 13312-16) and bind their breasts (ll. 13333-38). She says that, like the peacock's tail, a woman should make a wheel with her coat so men can see its expensive lining (ll. 13572-13576). This is all in the pursuit of pecuniary gain alone (ll. 3701-02). See Burns, pp. 80-84.



Fig. 1. The Pilgrim, MS Douce 104 fol. 33r

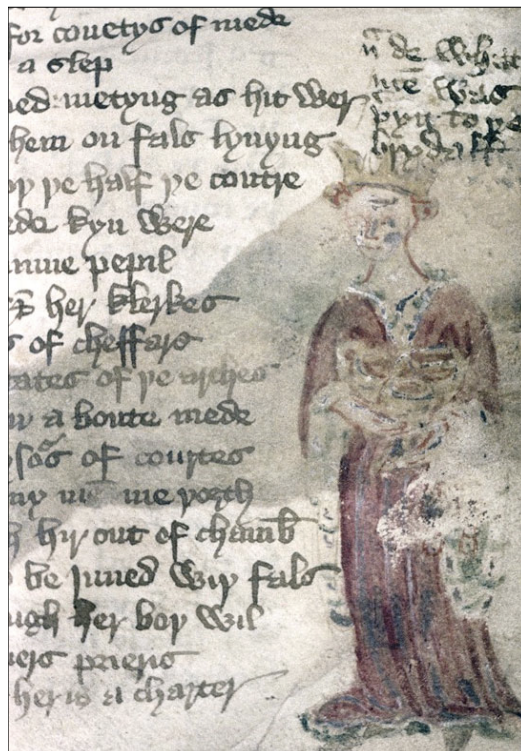


Fig. 2. Meed's first appearance, MS Douce 104 fol. 8r



Fig. 3. Meed on the back of the Sheriff, MS Douce 104 fol. 10r

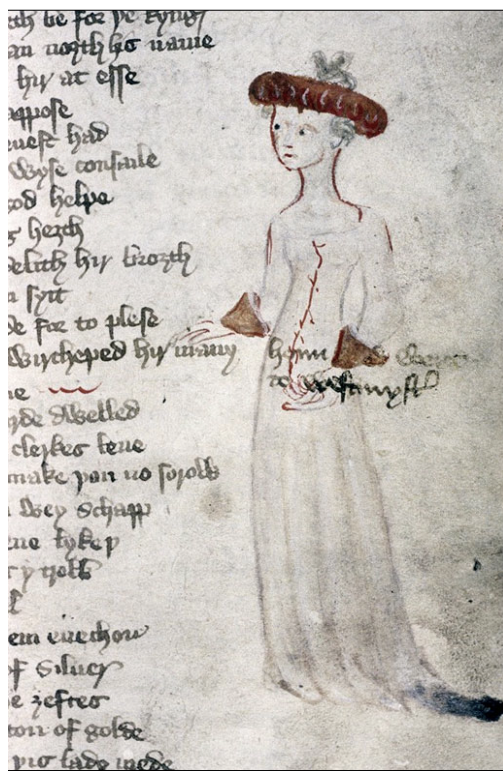


Fig. 4. Meed at court, MS Douce 104 fol. 11r



Fig. 5. Meed 'confessing', MS Douce 104 fol. 11v

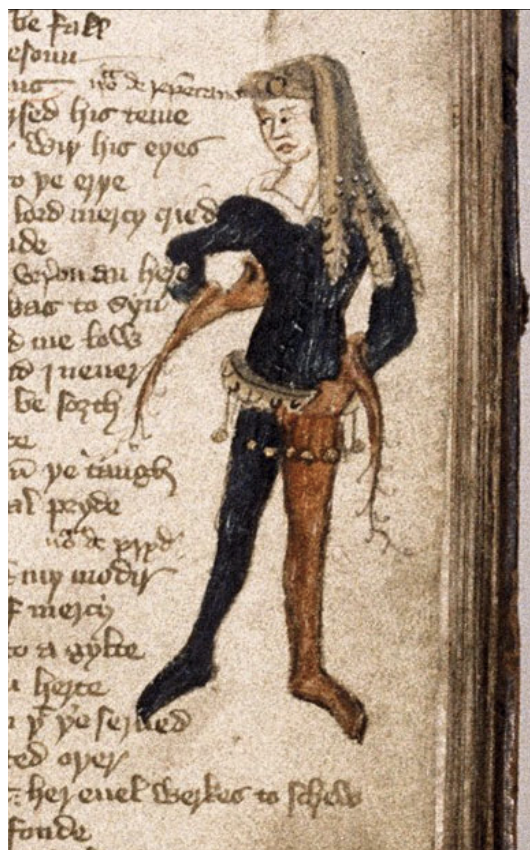


Fig. 6. Pride, MS Douce 104 fol. 24r

Haukyn and Pride: Saved by the (Folly) Bell

One unusual coat in the poem sets the scene for its most extreme expression of the untruthfulness of cloth. Haukyn's coat appears in the B-text in a long passage describing (with relish) the transgressions of the 'active man'. The surface of the coat is liberally marked with the stains of his sins. Haukyn's coat is an extraordinarily eloquent garment:

it was moled in many places with manye sondry plottes –
Of pride here a plot, and there a plot of unbuxom speche,
Of scornynge and of scoffyng and of unskilful berynge. (B.13.275-77)

The detail accorded this coat takes in its creases and patches (B.13.318), and the stains it bears of each of the seven deadly sins; it is 'bidropped', 'beflobered', 'biswatte', and 'bymolen' with Haukyn's misdeeds (B.13.321, 401, 403; B14.4); 'soilled | with likynge of lecherie' (B.13.343-44) and 'colomy thorough coveitise' (B.13.356). Haukyn admits: 'kouthe I nevere, by Crist! kepen it clene an houre, | [...] I [...] flobre it foule fro morwe til even' (B.14.12, 15). Each new dirty spot perceived on his coat (by Will, Patience, or Conscience: his companions) leads the narrator to give details of Haukyn's sin or brings Haukyn himself into confession. The coat signifies its wearer excessively. Each multiplying stain – it is 'fouler bi fele than it first semed' (B.13.320) – brings a new sin to light which itself introduces a new exemplary story and then a specific anecdote until it becomes a thing of endless textual possibility. When the Dreamer sees the coat is stained 'with wrathe and with wikkede wille' he is also able to see its marks of:

envye and yvel speche entisyng to fighte,
 Lying and lakkyng and leve tonge to chide;
 Al that he wiste wikked by any wight, tellen it,
 And blame men bihynde hir bak and bidden hem meschaunce
 And that he wiste by Wille, [to Watte tellen it],
 And that Watte wiste, Wille wiste it after. (B.13.321-327)

The garment reveals the wearer in multiple ways. Indeed, its revelations threaten to engulf him and overthrow its simple purpose as a garment.⁵²

Though the coat is described as 'a cote of Cristendom as Holy Kirke bileveth' (B.13.274) and Haukyn's 'best cote' (B.13.314) Haukyn makes clear that it is also his body: 'I have but oon hater | [...] I slepe thereinne o nyghtes' (B.14.1-2).⁵³ When urged to wash the filthy garment he speaks of cleaning it in the sickness of Lent and the misfortune of loss (B.14.5-7) and is urged to look further and enact the rituals of confession (B.14.17*a*, 18*a*, 21). So the coat not only signifies Haukyn's sins; it stands in for the filthy body that committed those sins. And his deeply physical transgressions (B.13.345-48) appear on the surface of the garment like stains from a body that is not there. Haukyn is like the terrifying women who make a body out of cloth and have no substance. He has sinned more thoroughly than is at first apparent.

The overlap between his coat and his body explains how Haukyn could have accrued so many sinful marks. Like personifications in other allegories who lose physical density Haukyn has stepped away from his body as a real

⁵² In some ways, the excessive and unrepresentable ways this coat signifies is like Piers's 'clothes of alle kyn craftes' (8.58) and Peace, who arrives outside the gates of Hell clothed in Patience (20.171) – we cannot imagine these verbal garments.

⁵³ The idea of the coat as the flesh resonates with the ideas of the soul and body as separable that I discussed in chapter 1, and specifically with its use of the word 'secte' to describe Christ's adoption of human skin.

thing. It has become like a text: distant and representative as opposed to near and insistent. It can be read by him and by others (Haukyn pragmatically introduces Conscience to the extent of the stains B.13.316-18) in formal disassociation; Haukyn has succeeded in attempts, like Meed's, to create another body in clothes. And because the closeness of the body to his selfhood has been broken he is able to stain it at will. It has become like a screen to be decorated. Haukyn has managed to spill himself onto his one coat. This image of a personification signifying too much in his clothes attests to the problems of letting signs stay on garments instead of looking for them on the body. Haukyn's view of his own body as a cloth has distanced him from what the act of staining or washing it actually means; rather than healing himself he is continuing to sin. He is able to think too metaphorically and the result is that he is not fully aware of the reality of his wrongdoings.

But the language of this passage also makes clear the very Langlandian way this has taken place. Words like *soilled*, *biswatte* and *flobre* are not nice. Haukyn's coat paints a picture; but it is a picture of filth that takes the idea of a staining body and rubs its efflux all over a garment. It is reminiscent of Chaucer's Pardoner's breeches with his 'fundement depeint' (CT 6.950), or the filthy doggerel song in *Mankind* sung by cast and audience: 'He that schythyth wyth hys hoyll [...] But he wyppe hys ars clen | [...] On hys breche yt shall be sen'.⁵⁴ But, unlike these other examples of stained clothing, Haukyn's body is

⁵⁴ *Mankind* in *The Macro Plays*, ed. by Eccles, pp. 153-184 (ll. 338-41). Chaucer's Pardoner is, of course, notably dressed 'al of the newe jet' (CT 1.682) just like New Guise in *Mankind* – who tries to change Mankind's clothing into something more fashion-conscious.

replaced by the thing reeking of it – as though even where it has disappeared the poem cannot let go of its materiality. One of the most disgusting manifestations of the body occurs when it is signified by a coat.

The coat is duly excised in the revisions of the C-text where much of Haukyn's racy history is cut and some is put into the mouths of the Seven Deadly Sins. It seems like the coat's representative consistency was not in line with the poem's ideas about visualising sin in cloth. When Haukyn reappears in a revised (and heavily cut) version in the C-text as *Activa Vita* all mention of this garment is gone.⁵⁵ Instead of him speaking the lines of his involved confession they have been given to three Sins and he is left with a momentary role as a pupil to Patience in which he tries to understand Patience's painful lesson about not seeking food.⁵⁶

Pride's appearance in the B-text is brief. She is 'Purnele proud-herte'; a woman who throws herself on the ground and promises to sew a hair shirt into her shift. She remains Purnele in the C-text but she speaks words moved from Haukyn's confession in the B-text (B.277-313a). Haukyn's words (which have a very clearly masculine flavour) are given to a woman (C.25-60a).

Purnele initially debases herself by declaring she will wear a hair shirt to 'affayten here flesshe that fers was to synne' (6.7). She suggests a desire to wear her skin down into uniformity with her garment. As she continues to speak, this

⁵⁵ He is left saying about clothes simply that he has 'fewe robes or forrede gounes' (15.201), an attempt to convey sinlessness that shows how compromised any type of dress has become in the poem.

⁵⁶ He is made to eat the *Pater noster* instead of food (15.246-47) – a passage that shows Langland trying out ascetic theories but ultimately rejecting them.

penance looks increasingly apposite. Pride's entire manner of being is expressive of her pride in dissembling. Haukyn's foul garment has been replaced by the dress of a figure who is always in disguise. Her dress is only truthful in its dissimulation. Pride has been bold, scornful to the skilful, she has wanted to seem 'a souerayn oen' (6.27) and have her name known in as many ways as possible. She has been:

Proud of aparayle in port amonges the peple
 Otherwyse then Y haue withynne or withouten,
 Me wilnyng that men wente Y were as in auer
 Ryche, and resonable and ryhtful of lyuyng;
 Bostyng and braggynge with many bolde othes,
 Vantyng vp my vaynglorie for eny vnder-nymyng;
 And yut so synguler be mysulue, as to syhte of peple,
 Was non such as mysulue ne non so pop-holy;
 Summe tyme in o sekte, summe tyme in another,
 In alle kyne couent contreuede how Y myhte
 Be holden for holy and honoured by that enchesoun;
 Wilnyng that men wente myne werkes weren the beste,
 And the connyngest of my craft, clerkyshe other other,
 And strengest vppon stede and styuest vnder gyrdel
 And louelokest to loke vppon and lykynge abedde
 And likyng of such a lyf that no lawe preiseth,
 Prout of my fayre fetures and for Y song shille. (6.30-46)

Purnele lies through clothes. She uses the fact that she is 'Proud of aparayle' or 'Summe tyme in o sekte, summe tyme in another' to change the way she is perceived: *ryche, resonable, holy, connyngest, strengest, louelokest, styuest*. She admits outright that she wants to be understood as owning different qualities than she does ('Otherwyse then Y haue withynne and withouten') and her pope-holiness and use of the clothes of different orders raises the possibility of the full disguise seemingly offered by a nun's habit. Indeed, she manages to signify her pride through clothing precisely by always wearing untruthful

clothing – a representative strategy that mocks the care taken by a figure like Piers, or the simplicity with which Holy Church wears her linen.⁵⁷

Purnele creates herself using clothes – and allies this act of making with language by repeatedly referring to her own boastful speech: 'bostynge and braggynge', 'carpe and consayle' (6.29), *telle*, and *song*. In doing this she is able to give a perfect definition of the term she represents. She is truthful in dress by being utterly mendacious: the image of lying Pride. And beneath this playful dissembling is a bigger shock. Purnele's behaviour is manly. Her desire for publicity – '[v]antyng vp my vaynglorie', '[w]ilnyng that men wente myne werkes weren the beste' – places her in the masculine sphere, and the things she wants people to believe she is – '[r]yche, and resonable and ryhtful of lyuyng', 'the connyngest of my craft, clerkysch other other', 'strengest vpon stede', 'lykyngest abedde' – are unusual ambitions for a woman. Moreover, Purnele wants people looking at her dress to have the direct impression they are seeing a man's body. When she says she wishes to appear 'styuest vnder gyrdel' it is clear she is describing her desire to give an impression of male virility through dress.⁵⁸ Condemnation of men making the attempt to make what is beneath

⁵⁷ In Chaucer's 'The Parson's Tale' one branch of Pride is overdressing – a habit whose waste is described in fabulous detail: '[n]at oonly the cost of embrowdyng, the degise endentyng or barryng, owndyng, palyng, wyndyng or bendyng [...] | but ther is also costlewe furring in hir gownes, so much powsonyng of chisels to maken holes, so much daggyng of sheres' (CT 10.417-18). How does a parson know so much about dress-making?

⁵⁸ Pearsall suggests that it may mean 'stoutest man alive', but concedes that it could be 'virile'; while Schmidt glosses it as 'most potent, virile'. C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 6.43; B text, ed. Schmidt, note to line 5.294. See Stephen A. Barney, 'Langland's Mighty Line', in *William Langland's 'Piers Plowman'*, ed. by Hewett-Smith, pp. 103-118. Barney compares the line in the B text (while it is still spoken by Haukyn) to similar comments made about Gawain, but notes it is ridiculous when said of a non-romance character: 'especially if we imagine what might be stiff under Haukyn's girdle' (p. 114).

their belts look bigger is directed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance at dandyish figures called 'galaunts'.⁵⁹ In frequent accounts these fops are accused of having nothing beneath the cod pieces they stuff.⁶⁰ In the case of Purnele there really is nothing beneath the stiff girdle she is wearing. The pride of a figure such as her trying to make herself seem like a man with a member is shocking and unique in *Piers*. She very clearly states she wants to be taken for 'the louelokest to loke vppon and lykyngest abedde' so it is obvious her aim is to be perceived as possessing a superlative virility.⁶¹

Langland's desire for the regularity of marital and gendered relations is well-attested.⁶² We can therefore infer that Purnele's display is the most extreme

⁵⁹ See Theresa Coletti, "Curtesy Doth It Yow Lere': The Sociology of Transgression in the Digby 'Mary Magdalene'", *English Literary History*, 71 (2004), 1-28 and Tony Davenport, 'Lusty fresche galaunts', in *Aspects of Early English Drama*, ed. by Paul Neuss (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), pp. 111-128. Though the galaunt gained much of his popularity in the later fifteenth century, he was recorded during the fourteenth. Davenport cites 'Satire on the Retinues of the Great' (1307) and a verse satirising Robert de Vere and Michael de la Pole's flight in 1388, which describes them as 'Galauntes, pur penyles' with 'lytel or noght in her powch' (p. 113). Davenport notes that pride is frequently related to galaunts. In *Wisdom*, Lucifer enters with the costume of a galaunt *beneath* his devil's costume: a strange kind of cross-dressing.

⁶⁰ Marjorie Garber points out that codpiece's in Shakespeare are only ever discussed in relation to their artificial nature: 'the codpiece [...] is a sign of what might – or might not be – 'under there'. [...] The codpiece confounds the question of gender, since it can signify yes or no, full or empty, lack or lack of lack' (Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Penguin: London, 1993), p. 122).

The question of fullness or lack circulates around New Guise, the dandy in *Mankind*, who says 'I have a grett purse, ser, but I have no monay' (l. 479) and complains repeatedly of pain in his 'jewels' after Mankind's attack (l. 381, 429, 496) until Mischief offers to castrate him (l. 434-35) and he protests (l. 441). At the end of Chaucer's 'The Pardoner's Tale' Harry Bailley, the Host, expresses his desire to cut off the Pardoner's balls (CT 6.952-54) after he has been asked to unbuckle his 'purs' so he can kiss the Pardoner's relics (CT 6.945). The relics have been read as displaced 'jewels' that refer to the Pardoner's castrated state – a state covered over with fragmented finery. Dinshaw, *Poetics*, pp. 158-68.

⁶¹ It has been argued that Chaucer's Pardoner is a cross-dresser (because he is described as a 'mare') and has a heterosexual relationship with the Summoner (by whom he is possibly blackmailed, as other women are). See, Jeffrey Rayner Myers, 'The Pardoner as Female Eunuch', *Studia Neophilologica*, 72 (2000), 54-62.

⁶² See M. Teresa Tavormina, *Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995).

expression of Pride he could create. In the context of other medieval narratives of cross-dressers her desire to be understood as sexually available and active is unusual.⁶³ When saintly women dress as men they are presented as becoming masculine precisely to escape the feminine condition that is wedded to physicality.⁶⁴ Numerous plots then hinge on a Potiphar's Wife scenario in which the protagonist is accused of rape by a lustful spurned woman and must prove her femininity as a way of escaping accusation.⁶⁵ The impression we get from such stories is of a comfortable reliance on the woman's incapacity in performing the act of which she is accused and the laughable improbability of the claims made against her. When she reveals her true body at the end suspicion falls away and order is returned.⁶⁶ We are always left in no doubt, however, that the women who desires the cross-dresser forms a meaningful

⁶³ See Vern L. Bullough, 'Cross-Dressing and Gender Role Change in the Middle Ages' in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (Garland: London, 1996), pp. 223-243 (pp. 225-227); and Sandra Lowerre, 'To Rise Beyond Their Sex: Female Cross-Dressing in Caxton's *Vitas Patrum*' in *Riddles, Knights and Cross-Dressing Saints: Essays in Medieval Language and Literature*, ed. by Thomas Honegger (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 55-94 (pp. 55-57).

⁶⁴ 'The female who wore male clothing or who somehow effectively impersonated a man was not only gaining status but also making herself more rational and holy. Men who cross-dressed were immediately suspected of weakness and effeminacy' (Bullough, 'Cross-Dressing', p. 227).

⁶⁵ Lowerre cites the examples of St. Marina and St. Eugene. St. Marina is accused by a girl whose father's house she stays at for making her pregnant, St. Eugene is accused by a girl of molesting her and put on trial (with her unsuspecting father as judge) then bares her breasts when all the monks are threatened with death for her transgressions; the whole town then converts only to be martyred en masse by the (Roman) Emperor. Saint Théodore is another example: accused by a female innkeeper. See Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, 'Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama,' *New Literary History*, 28 (1997), 319-344. Silence is accused by the king's wife, Eufeme, of raping her when he refuses to sleep with her. The queen beats herself up (ll. 4075-79). While referring to Silence, I use male pronouns for episodes in which she is dressed as a man and female while she is dressed as a woman; in doing so I echo the text.

⁶⁶ Cross-dressing Silence is scrubbed up by Nature after she assumes female dress as she has come dangerously close to being transformed by her masculine clothing (ll. 6669-6676).

sexual attachment to her.⁶⁷ In each tale it is clearly stated that the cross-dressing woman is shocked by the implication that she would ever want to sleep with the one who accuses her. She rejects and never seeks the love of the woman she attracts. In many cases, though, this display of shock and disgust at the sexual advances of a woman runs alongside a successful display of powerfully masculine traits in other arenas. Cross-dressing women frequently beat men in their narratives in fields where women are not traditionally supposed to excel: in music, battle, and piety.⁶⁸ Their achievements attract the men surrounding them, a feeling which can be transferred into open sexual desire - and marriage - once their 'true' gender is unmasked.⁶⁹ This unassuming manliness is not expressed by Pride. She explicitly invites the kind of sexual attention we find outwardly denied, but unconsciously invited, in other cross-dressing narratives. Pride asks us why her body shouldn't matter in expressions of desire and virility. The poem here reaches the fullest expression of the possible inversions that can result from untruthful dress and a vision of a fabrication that I think it finds too shocking to name.

⁶⁷ Eufeme, in *Silence*, for example, kisses Silence passionately and undresses in front of him (ll. 3769-72, 3793-94), she almost faints from desire (ll. 3881-82).

⁶⁸ Silence travels for four years with jongleurs who, on finding his skill far greater than theirs, plot to kill him (ll. 3201-339), he wins a tournament in Paris (l. 5143), Silence's prowess in battle and fame is recounted in detail (ll. 5521-5638), St. Eugene is made abbot of her abbey because of her superlative spirituality.

⁶⁹ In *Silence*, the King marries Silence once she has been dressed as a woman (ll. 6677). This can become more complex. In his analysis of *La Vie de Sainte Euphrosine* Simon Gaunt points out that the monks who lust after Euphrosine while she is cross-dressed make a queer fissure in the text because they are attracted to someone they think is a man, Simon Gaunt, 'Straight Minds / 'Queer' Wishes in Old French Hagiography *La Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*', in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 153-74 (p. 163).

The lack of explicit discussion in the poem of Pride's specific act of Pride has caused her use of attire to be largely ignored. Masha Raskolnikov is the only person I know of to have acknowledged the possibilities presented by the apparent switch in gender between Purnele and Pride.⁷⁰ She discusses Pride in the context of Brandon Teena, the transsexual violently killed in 1993 who became the subject of the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*. She argues that Pride can be interpreted according to twentieth-century models of transgendered experience because we cannot discount experiences that occurred before the term was coined simply because they predate it. The article gestures towards 'the multiple intersecting temporalities able to co-exist and, contingently, to meet, when medievalists keep both past and present in their heads at the same time'.⁷¹ Raskolnikov sees the dualism often cited in descriptions of trans people's experience ('a man's soul trapped in a woman's body') as both curiously medieval and allegorical. She thinks Pride could be a medieval transsexual and gives a physical basis for her claim by describing an operation involving 'some sort of application of fire and ice'.⁷² While these claims are bold and helpful, I think that the theoretical diction Raskolnikov uses makes her ironically conservative. She says:

Writing about the Middle Ages means writing about those who are dead and cannot talk back no matter what we say about them, and this empowers me to twist Langland's words for my own agenda of queering the Middle Ages – possibly in a way he would have abhorred, certainly

⁷⁰ Masha Raskolnikov, 'Transgendering Pride', *Postmedieval*, 1 (2010), 157-164.

⁷¹ Raskolnikov, 'Transgendering Pride', 158.

⁷² Raskolnikov, 'Transgendering Pride', 162.

in a way that gives me gleeful pleasure.⁷³

She ascribes the alteration that leads to Pride's transgendered identity as an 'error' or 'a slip of the pen' and – in the title of her article – she suggests that her reading is creating Pride's transgendered identity rather than the text itself, or Langland.⁷⁴ While exhilarating, I think Raskolnikov's desire to queer the poem actually causes her to look away from the very firm textual basis Langland has left regarding Pride's uncertain gender. Pride has already been queered; she has been altered through knowing revision to become a woman expressing a man's desires. I think the idea that she undergoes a surgical bodily change is wrong. Rather than posit a story not indicated in the text I want to suggest that it records the idea that cross-dressing can lead to a gendered identity and sexual desires that differ entirely from an idealised 'norm' and therefore represent a deadly sin.⁷⁵

⁷³ Raskolnikov, 'Transgendering Pride', 163. There is literature that supports her claims that Raskolnikov doesn't cite, such as the story discussed by Miri Rubin in an Alsacian chronicle of a woman in 1300 whose vagina was cut open to reveal a penis and testicles, see Rubin 'The person in the form: medieval challenges to bodily order' in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. by Kay and Rubin, pp. 100-122 (p. 101). While hermaphrodites caused suspicion there are instances of individuals with two sex organs where one did not function who were tolerated and accepted, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park 'The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature: Sexual Ambiguity in Early Modern France' in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. by Fradenburg and Freccero, pp. 117-136.

⁷⁴ Raskolnikov, 'Transgendering Pride', 162.

⁷⁵ Pride could equally be dressing as a boy to titillate women and herself as is potentially the case in the history of John/Eleanor Rykener: a fourteenth-century male to female cross-dresser who worked as an embroideress (though his confession indicates that some clients believed he was a woman even after sex), see David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, 'The Interrogation of of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth Century London', *GLQ*, 1 (1995), 459-465 and 'Ut cum muliere': A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth Century London', in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. by Fradenburg and Freccero, pp. 99-116; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp. 100-12. Dinshaw indicates that John/Eleanor may have given what they wanted to his/her clients precisely as a 'feminized man, or phallic woman' and that John/Eleanor may have derived pleasure from his/her cross-dressing and having sex with men dressed as a woman (pp. 110).

I think the appearance of Haukyn's words in Pride's mouth is not a mistake. What is clear to me is that, in the context of a long-running distrust of attire, Langland chooses to show this worst sin boasting of a body that does not exist beneath its clothing.⁷⁶ The sin goes on to claim sexual prowess on the basis of this lack. In terms of sexuality and his notions of 'truthfulness' this is one of the more shocking things Langland could invent and so it is placed at the beginning of a series of shocking confessions.

In claiming this I have to disagree with not only Raskolnikov but with previous editors of *Piers*. I believe it is entirely probable that Pride is represented as a cross-dresser and do not do this in the spirit of finding the queer in the text (though I applaud cases where this is achieved) but in order to relate Langland to contemporary texts that frequently discussed female to male cross-dressing. Pride's omission of any more explicit statement that she is aspiring to look like a man has led editors and readers of the text to either omit mention of Pride's gender or to label it as a simple mistake. But I think that, in spite of the lack of overt confession to the 'sin' of cross-dressing, Pride is a woman dressing as a man.

The almost complete silence that surrounds notice of the alteration of Pride's gender in C is revealing. As a cross-dresser she is an unusual figure in Langland's poem, and the lack of comment she receives in the poem is echoed by editors. She is the most heavily revised persona in passus 6 (which is the

⁷⁶ Raskolnikov reminds us 'Pride was the sin of Lucifer' ('Transgendering Pride', p. 161); see also, 16.212, where the dreamer is one of Pride's knights and linked to Lucifer.

most changed passus in the C-text) and so one would expect she would form a key point of reference in discussions of the changes between the B and C texts.

This is not the case. George Russell writes simply that in passus 6:

from line 11 onward the shape changes. Instead of now introducing Lecher as in *AB*, the poet gives an intervention by Repentaunce, followed by a response from Pride (no longer Purnele Proudheart). This passage was transferred here from *B* 13.275-312*a*, where it forms part of the Haukyn episode.⁷⁷

The parenthetical instruction is telling in its unusual (for Russell) lack of supporting textual evidence. In the C-text there is no point at which Pride explicitly changes from one person to another. Russell's characteristically engaging tone is dropped in this aside, which in its flat negative draws a firm barrier between the reader and the possibilities presented by this revised character.⁷⁸

Pearsall writes 'it may be noted that the sins [...] are all men [...] except Pride [...] who herself soon mutates into a man, partly through the incorporation [...] of material from the confession of Haukyn'.⁷⁹ Later he is more expansive in his discussion, writing that what Purnele says is 'only

⁷⁷ George H. Russell, 'Poet as Reviser: The Metamorphosis of the Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins in *Piers Plowman*', in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in its Contexts 700-1600, Essays on Medieval Literature in Honour of E. Talbot Donaldson*, ed. by Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim, 1982), pp. 53-66 (p. 59).

⁷⁸ George Russell does not mention Pride in 'Some Aspects of the Process of Revision in *Piers Plowman*', in *Critical Approaches*, ed. by Hussey, pp. 27-49; neither does she appear in his 'Some Early Responses to the C-version of *Piers Plowman*', *Viator*, 15 (1984), 275-284, where the Douce 104 illustrations are a major point of discussion. Pride, or indeed the Seven Deadly Sins, is not discussed in 'The Revisions of the C Version', in Russell's co-edited edition of the C-text, where other passages are discussed at length to illustrate the nature of the poem's revisions. While the editors point to the relocation of material, this is only to say they cannot speculate as to the reasons for it, and to provide a footnote to Russell's 'Poet as Reviser': which of course leads us to the impasse discussed. *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, ed. by Russell and Kane, p. 66, n. 11.

⁷⁹ C text, ed. Pearsall, p. 39.

generally appropriate to a woman, and some is certainly more appropriate to a man, not surprisingly, since it is from the account of Haukyn' he sees her early promise of amendment (the hair shirt) as troubling 'unless it be considered that a separate personification of Pride begins to speak at line 14'.⁸⁰ This solution (a separation between two personifications) is repeated by Schmidt, who points out the change from Will to Purnele in the episode's opening lines:

Ryht with that ran Repentaunce and rehersed his teme
And made Will to wepe water with his eyes.
Purnele proude-herte platte here to the erthe. (6.1-3)

He argues these indicate that one shift in gender has already occurred. This is interesting, but surely not relevant as the scene requires the development of confession from Will to a sin in the first instance for the display of the sins to take place at all. Schmidt goes on to say: 'as some heterogeneity is to be expected in the drama of vices in action, Pride must be a composite figure with traits appropriate to different sexes and occupations, not a unique individual'.⁸¹ This is neatly plausible but still does not seem applicable to Pride, whose singular voice does not falter after line 8.

One sin that ostentatiously mutates between genders, Wrath, gives evidence of how such heterogeneity is presented by the poem.⁸² In Wrath's

⁸⁰ C text, ed. Pearsall, note to lines 3 and 6.

⁸¹ See William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Parallel Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt, vol. 2 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), note to lines 6.14-29.

⁸² Cooper sees Pride as changing gender in an exemplary fashion similar to Wrath as part of the 'illusory' nature of the confessions' realism ('Personification', pp. 37-38).

confession he displays male and female traits.⁸³ But he does so in a very different way to Pride by explicitly body-hopping having already established himself as, partly, the spirit of wrath that moves between homes and arguments.⁸⁴ He describes himself as a wanderer who moves dwelling between '[a]lle manere men' (6.115): he has followed friars (6.118), beggars, barons (6.123), and monks (6.151). He describes time spent in a nunnery inciting arguments between the sisters. Once the women are shouting at each other – 'thou lixt' and 'thou lixt' (6.138) – he awakes 'and wolde be avenged. | And thenne Y crye and crache with my kene nayles' (6.139-40). Wrath changes into one of the fighting nuns, bringing forth a stereotypical female weapon: nails. Later he reappears in a parish context sitting among *wyues* and *wydwes* in pews and appearing to change from a female antagonist back into a personification:

the persone hit knoweth
 How lytel Y louye Letyse at the style;
 For she had haly-bred ar Y, my herte gan change.
 Aftur mete, aftirward, she and she chydde
 And Y, Wrath, was war, and worthe on hem bothe
 Tyl ayther clepede other 'hore!' and of with the clothes
 Til bothe here hedes were bar and bloody here chekes. (6.144-150)

Pride's subtler gender shift pales in comparison. If she were changing gender to inhabit other bodies and create a composite figure it is strange that she does not do this as explicitly as Wrath. But Pride is not a heterogeneous and general

⁸³ Frank sees Envy as shifting gender – but ascribes this to Langland's wish to show 'envy at work among both men and women' ('Art', p. 247); Spearing understands Wrath's shifting nature as expressing the 'multidimensionality' Langland saw in language – in that his allegorical formulations are provisional and shift constantly (*Readings*, pp. 223-227).

⁸⁴ See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 6.103. Guise and Liar move between associates as a way of influencing them with their signified wrong. Covetousness's life among the drapers also bears some similarity – he is taught by them but shows by association that they take their lead from his name (6.215-220).

figure like Wrath, she is a unique individual. As such, she displays Pride through cross-dressing. And she has been deliberately revised to be in this state.

Haukyn's confession is used elsewhere in the speeches of the sins and wherever it appears the relevance of the lines to the sin speaking is self-evident. B.13.321-41 appears in the description of Envy encapsulating his destructive power to destroy friendship and his own body. Lechery receives the brilliantly lascivious lines:

eche mayde that Y mette Y made here a signe
Semyng to synneward and summe Y gan taste
About the mouthe and bynethe bygan Y to grope,
Til bothe oure wil was oen and to the work we yeden. (6.178-81)

These could have been written only for him. In the context of all this good work the mistaken attribution of Pride's words would be incongruous. The apposite nature of the lines used and consequent augmentation of Lechery and Envy's effect make me think Pride's extraordinary transformation no mistake.

Moreover the reviser handled this section of the poem with detailed care. The lines transferred from Haukyn's speech in the B-text have been substantially rewritten in the process. Only six lines retain their original shape. This rewriting creates a new speech which focusses with more precision and brevity upon specifics acts of dissembling: both in speech and costume. In addition this entire section was heavily revised, receiving the sustained focus of the poet's

attention.⁸⁵ Focus would not have facilitated mistakes.

Pride, therefore, is a boastful personification who makes another identity for herself out of clothes: she is a woman who cross-dresses as a man. She creates a new self that not only ignores her body but tries to give it the functioning characteristics of an entirely different one through cloth. Her behaviour is the superlative expression of Langland's fear of the destructively untruthful capabilities of dress. She ignores the body and tries to change its meaning and its 'natural' processes. In her speech, Pride tells people what her body is, she does not care about what it might actually be.

The illustrator of Douce 104, who we have seen interpreting Meed's words with wit and precision, responds to Pride's speech by depicting her dressed as a man. Just as he saw an amusing aid to his visual work in Meed's appearance so he also sees that there is something to say visually in relation to Pride. This is Pride's assertion of virility. And he places an allusion to it alongside text in which Pride is clearly a woman.

⁸⁵ There are forty-five revised and transferred lines following the author's apologia in passus 5 that end four lines before the beginning of passus 6. There is a new division between passus 5 and 6. Eleven lines then follow at the start of passus 6 before revision begins again (on Pride).

The C Pride is partly consistent with Langland's un-systematic revision between the C- and B-texts, a process that Russell has described as 'selective, sporadic, and local' ('Poet as Reviser', p. 37). Russell notes that the reviser shows an 'alert and scrupulous scrutiny' that focusses on minute textual problems and intense revisions of occasional passages, while leaving large sections of the poem unchanged. He believes that the C reviser was using a heavily corrupted B exemplar. Thus, he frequently revises where his witness is imperfect, attempting to return to the poem's original state, and then becomes fixated on the passage in hand, going on to re-write at length. This creates an uneven whole, in which some long passages remain unchanged, and others have minute, almost finicky, revisions. The newer poem does, of course, also have wider theological and political differences to the earlier ones, but the incomplete and potentially random nature of some of the changes made by the reviser is notable. In passus 6, certain large-scale revisions are not influenced by this imperfect exemplar as thorough and substantial alterations to the original text takes place unmotivated by small mistakes. These involve the relocation of Haukyn's speech.

See also Russell 'The Revisions of the C Version' and 'Some Aspects of Revision', p. 56.

In the Douce image, Pride is elegantly clad in parti-coloured tights, a short jacket, a dagged golden liripipe and gloves with long tasselled flourishes. Around Pride's middle hangs a heavy golden belt from which a series of bells dangle on long strings (folly bells), under this belt is a swelling codpiece and Pride holds her belt with one hand and rests another on her hip (fig. 6).⁸⁶ While this outfit is referencing a series of sartorial follies,⁸⁷ it is notable that its most outrageous element (the belt) so clearly highlights Pride's genitals.⁸⁸ This is a gloss on Pride's claim that she is 'styuest vnder gyrdel'. In the image the illustrator has made the girdle itself the means through which she communicates this idea. And the belt is not only striking to look at, it is a jangling loud accessory that (in use) would signal the wearer's presence in a way that would make attention to her arrival the same as attention to her pelvis, and so the person wearing it becomes metonymically synonymous with this region of her body. Pride has made herself into a walking symbol of the

⁸⁶ For a description of Pride's dress see Kathleen Scott, 'The Illustrations of *Piers Plowman* in Bodleian Library MS. Douce 104', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 4 (1990), 1-86 (pp. 30-31). She is one of few late medieval English depictions of this sin. As such, she does not follow the usual iconography in which a sin 'rides' an aspect of its wrongdoing (like Meed). This is very much in evidence in images of Pride in manuscripts of the *Pèlerinage*, in which she is elaborately decorated.

She is wearing many of the garments damned by Chaucer's Parson because they reveal too much of the male anatomy. He hates short jackets: 'these kuttid sloppes, or haynselyns, that thurgh hire shortnesse ne covere nat the shaleful memres of man' (CT 10.422). He hates tight hose: 'some of hem shownen the boce of her shap, and the horrible swollen membres, that semeth like the maladie of hirnia, in the wrappyng of hir hoses' (CT 10.423). He hates parti-coloured tights: 'And mooreover, the wrecched swollen membres that they shewe thurgh disgisyng, in departyng of hir hoses in whit and reed, semeth that half hir shameful privee membres weren flayne' (CT 10.425). Pride is depicted dressing like a man who wants to show his manhood.

⁸⁷ Dagged clothing is seen elsewhere in the poem as a sign of abandonment and folly: 'And then lowh Lyf and lette dagge his clothes' (22.143), Lyf is under the influence of the forces of Antichrist. For the Parson's comments on dagged clothing see 10.418, 421.

⁸⁸ Kathleen Scott names the bells 'folly-bells', *Illustrations*, p. 30, n. 55.

thing she lacks.⁸⁹ The bells hang down over her groin in crude imitation of penises. And rather than just one, she has seven. Such a strong assertion of bodily power goes very far to suggesting a fabrication – why would the belt be necessary if the genitals it so proudly advertised were there? Pride's dandified dress marks her even more clearly than the text as a galaunt: a figure whose display is synonymous with deceit and whose outward opulence signifies only inner corruption. The more such a figure displays, the more he or she deceives.⁹⁰

This suggestive image is placed alongside the section of the text in which Purnele is speaking. Images are cannily placed by this illustrator – who has here gleaned the relevant information from the confession and returned to its opening to paint Pride (there is plenty of room on fol. 24v, on which Pride sounds more like a man). He therefore notes the fact that Pride seems to change sex while putting the image next to her first, clearly feminine, appearance – a reader would be shocked by the discrepancy and reconsider the identity of the figure talking. The mixture of this doubleness with the suggestive girdle indicates the uncertain relationship between Pride's body and her clothes. This is helped along by the fact that Pride's elbow is interrupted by the word *here* from Purnele's promise that she will sew a hair shirt into her clothes. The

⁸⁹ See Garber, pp. 118-124.

⁹⁰ See Davenport, 'Lusty fresche galaunts'. This manuscript was written and illustrated in 1427 and so can be associated with a fifteenth-century culture in which texts that described the evils of galaunts were written such as *Mankind* and *Wisdom*, though it predates these (*Wisdom* is c. 1460-63, *Mankind* c. 1465-1470, see *Macro Plays*, ed. by Eccles, p. xxx).

illustrator employs this kind of visual allusion elsewhere in the manuscript.⁹¹

And I think the disruption of this picture is figured as a reminder of the idea of clothing as a rough penance to a woman dressed in luxuriously false cloth. It is also an allusion to the ability of clothes to transform their wearer; the hair shirt rubs at and removes the skin – could wearing the clothes of a man (especially a belt covered in penile decoration) make the wearer masculine? Pride's appearance has fooled most readers of this manuscript into thinking she is simply a man.⁹² This picture indicates she has succeeded in fashioning a new body for herself out of cloth.

This visual reading of the text works with an obvious problem in images of the body: there is no 'underneath'. Clothes are the only thing that matter in a portrait, unless the figure is naked, and they are the only tools an illustrator has

⁹¹ The eyes of images look at relevant words, words are written across parts of bodies or touched. See Hilmo, 13. Hilmo uses the example of the digger on fol. 39r over whose spade is the word *swynke* and who appears to be digging up the word *shew*: 'the Digger is literally showing how to work!' (p. 20).

⁹² Schmidt describes this as a depiction of 'the more obviously male figure suggested by ll. 30-5', *Parallel-Text*, ed. Schmidt, note to lines 6.14-29. Pearsall says: 'Interestingly [...] Pride represented as an elegantly clad young man [...] despite the text' C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 6.3. Earlier Derek Pearsall describes Pride's liripipe as 'long golden hair hanging in tresses decorated with beads or jewels' (Pearsall, 'Manuscript Illustration', p. 192). Perhaps he was thinking of the Pardoner: 'This Pardoner had heer as yelow as wex, | [...] And therwith he his shuldres overspradde; | [...] But hood, for jolitee, wered he noon' (1.675, 678, 680). Kerby-Fulton does not mention the ways Pride's pronouncements become more masculine-sounding, or the textual changes; she describes her as a woman in the text and attributes her masculinity in the image to the 'minstrels bells' she wears and argues that the popularity of minstrels in Anglo-Ireland led the illustrator (who was Anglo-Irish) to depict Pride as one. Despres does not mention the circumstances surrounding Pride's gender, but attributes her masculine attire to the illustrator's desire to link all the sins to different aspects of Will's self, *Iconography*, pp. 32-35, 157-159, 215, n. 68. Scott attributes the masculine attire of Pride to iconographic convention, 'Illustrations', pp. 30-31.

Interestingly Mary Carruthers sees this image of Pride as: 'a woman-dandy who wears a gorgeous robe and a belt with golden bells on it' (*The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 289), Carruthers reads straight through the cloth to Pride's female body and doesn't see the male dress she wears.

to create the identity of the figure seen.⁹³ Pride in this illustration will only ever look like a man. In the picture, and in the readings it has received, Pride 'passes' because we are forced to look at her clothes and not through them – to see the man she resembles and not the body she has beneath. But this is no disadvantage in terms of reading her identity. The illustration participates in what Marjorie Garber has argued is the theoretically more productive way of reading cross-dressing. She writes that viewers should understand the cross-dresser as something other than a gendered body in disguise: a 'male or female manqué'.⁹⁴ Rather, cross-dressing challenges ideas that the revelation of sexual identity presents the truth. Once a cross-dresser has passed (or, indeed, simply cross-dressed) gendered identity can never return to the stable binary assured by the physical solidity of the body.⁹⁵ Cross-dressing interrupts the either/or of gender, lacing something new in between and questioning the ability of clothes to reflect bodies. It subordinates the body to the work of self-fashioning. So Pride, here, is not only an illustration of a cross-dresser but an illustration that presents precisely the devaluation of the body's meaning that Langland so fears. Her body is covered in such a way that does not make it just disappear (like Meed's) but that transforms it into a thing with new and unutterable meanings

⁹³ Illustrations of personifications obviously all suffer from this problem. Perhaps this is why there is only one illustrated manuscript of *Piers* – in which personifications largely do not follow iconographic conventions relating to their personified identities. Scott, 'Illustrations', p. 5; Woolf, 114-115. One example of an illustrator wittily overcoming this problem is Pope-Holiness in Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 25526 fol. 4v, in which she simply looks like a nun but where a naked man defecates in the margins below her.

⁹⁴ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests*, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁵ See Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p. 106.

– unseen and menacing. The interplay between cloth and body mirrors the relationship of the body to the supplementary text that Langland keeps at arm's length in a poem where the body is the source of so much expression. The 'real' body can never be wholly incorporated in the text/cloth and Pride's free-wheeling understanding of her own identity makes this playfully clear.

Conclusion

When Pride reappears in passus 21, it is with a threat to Piers that:

youre carte the bileue
 Shal be coloured so queyntly and keuered vnder oure sophistrie
 That Conscience shal nat knowe ho is cristene or hethene
 Ne no manere marchaunt that with moneye deleth
 Where he wynne with riht, with wrong or with vsure! (21.346-350)⁹⁶

These threats reiterate the fears raised in Pride's confession. Quaint and colourful decoration covers the beautiful simplicity of the cart of belief. It replaces it with something else beautiful but this thing is sophistry: it makes no attempt to display the truth. The cart's meaning is unobtainable like the surface of a text when it is beautiful and not truthful or like a body covered in rich and expensive dress.⁹⁷ Fears of things like this arrive in the poem in the Prologue with pride when those in the field who first sin: 'putte hem to pruyde and parayled hem ther-aftir | In continance of clothyng in many kyne gyse' (Pr.

⁹⁶ At the beginning the speech is specified as voiced by Pride's 'spye Spille-loue, [and] oen Speke-euele-bihynde' (21.340) but by its close it is attributed to Pride (21.354) who is also its guiding principle.

⁹⁷ Silence, incidentally, considers himself a sophism, see *Silence*, ll. 2539.

25-26). Many guises are not welcome but have to be contended with from the very beginning. They are the words that Langland has to place over the world and over the apparently simple truths of the body to make it part of a text. In putting such things in language, Langland fears he is covering the simple and true with sophistry. He works against this, making his virtuous personifications radically simple and showing how the dressed up use clothing to lie. But ultimately – as *Pride* shows – it is easy to take what a personification wears or says at face value. *Pride's* lie has gone largely unremarked.

Chapter Three

'So harde he yede': Allegorical Violence

Piers Plowman is deeply concerned with how conceptual edicts affect people in their material lives. Allegory has been characterised as an endemically violent literary form and Langland shows repeatedly in *Piers* that he is concerned that the bodies within it are fiercely controlled rather than truthfully represented.¹ Langland was writing during a time in which the ideological demands made of the rural population bore no relationship to their needs, and in which violence wrote meanings boldly across the bodies of its victims in public and in private.² As well as in state-sponsored spectacle, violence creates meaning in literature.³ And Langland's presentation of the meetings of personifications and ordinary

¹ Teskey, *Allegory* and 'Colonial Allegories'.

² See David Aers, *Imagination*, Aers discusses the church's implication in acts of structural violence in 'Visionary Eschatology: *Piers Plowman*', *Modern Theology*, 16 (2000), 3-17 (p. 13); for the violence that made complex meanings from Christ's suffering in the late Middle Ages, see Aers, 'Christ's Humanity'; see also Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure, and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2005), for a rich description of how a series of late medieval representations of violent acts made meaning (and were resisted in doing so); Maidie Hilmo discusses how the illustrator of Douce 104 conservatively engages with its apparently indulgent representations of chastisement, Hilmo, 14. Women's self-inflicted violence, it has been argued, was a form of *imitatio Christi*, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Feast*, pp. 245-51. Eve Salisbury, Georgiana Donavin, and Merrall Llewelyn Price point out that to see what is meant by violence in a medieval context: 'we must reimagine a word now implying aberrational physical conflict to include the concept of approved corporal punishment', *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*, ed. by Eve Salisbury, Georgiana Donavin, and Merrall Llewelyn Price (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), p. 6.

³ See Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 3 and for the intersections of state and literary violence (and their paradoxical capacities to empower the oppressed) see his *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 1-78. Violence and pain created musical meanings, Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 192-258.

bodies in his allegory shows how force inflicted on the latter can make abstract verbal meanings come into being.⁴ This textual exploration of the brutal birth of meaning makes an opening in the text through which a rigid critique of violent coercion emerges. Such a critique is focussed on Langland's concerns with how the abstract engages with bodies. He senses at times that the power of words over bodies is of generalising abstract concepts that have no real ability to represent the particular and so bully it into representations that have little to do with the material itself. Langland perceives this same process in politics. Thinking through these ideas in poetry, he uses his imaginative sensitivity to the body to display it in struggles with meaning that express the unique difficulties of living in a world where abstract and concrete consistently meet. His form, allegory, and his use of it intersect to create powerful representations of bodies that are victims of semantic violence.

In the previous chapter I claimed that Langland sees cloth as a misleading cover-up to the physical 'real' he wants to capture in his writing. In this chapter I examine what is frequently entailed in that 'capture': principally a violence that results from the desire for representative consistency. Gordon Teskey argues that violence is found at the moments where bodies are forced to express meanings. The reason for this violence is germane to Langland's project:

⁴ See Ben Parsons, 'Shearing the Shepherds: Violence and Anticlerical Satire in Langland's *Piers Plowman*', *Medium Ævum*, 79 (2010), 189-206 (pp. 196-99). Parsons argues violence in the poem allows us to see hierarchies emerge between warring personifications.

it is the desire to make nature express itself.⁵ Teskey, influenced by Paul de Man, writes that this expression is not readily forthcoming in language.⁶ He argues that writers attach synthetic meanings to the physical in a struggle best expressed by an analogy with Aristotle's understanding of the female position during sex.⁷ That is, one powerful partner provides the impression of form and genius while the other gives pure matter.⁸ Matter resists this process of making and so violence is applied to it to make it yield. As literary allegory depicts physical things meeting abstract words it is the genre *par excellence* in which to

⁵ The central problem in Teskey's book is the frustrating contradiction of our embodiedness in a physicality outside the realm of our iteration and he describes humans inventing allegory as a means of dealing with the ineffable numinous of nature. This is '[t]he dilemma of a consciousness produced by what is alien to it' (p. 7).

He discusses how the natural remains unsaid in allegory, but is instead transformed into a longed-for 'key' to the meaning indicated in its complex figural structure. It is like a vanishing-point: known but beyond-reach. Without this key, other meanings become attached to things (in literary and political allegories, as well as in allegorical ways of thinking) in a utilitarian but unenlightened web. But these things bear no actual relation to each other, and so the way they become associated is through a violence in which the nature of the thing is denuded of material characteristics so that it can seamlessly carry the concept it is meant to express (pp. 2-5). He writes that '[i]n Derridean terms, allegory is the logocentric genre *par excellence*, the genre that depends more explicitly than any other on the notion of a centred structure in which differences infold into the one' (p. 3).

⁶ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, pp. 188-245; 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), pp. 173-210. He writes: 'allegory suggests a disjunction between the way the world appears in reality and the way it appears in language' ('Rhetoric', p. 176).

⁷ Teskey, *Violence*, pp. 14-21.

⁸ See William F. MacLehose, 'Aristotelian Concepts of Women and Gender', in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006) pp. 35-36; Dinshaw, *Poetics*, p. 19 and ns. 48-49, pp. 200-1; Vern L. Bullough, 'Medieval Medical and Scientific views of Women', *Viator*, 4 (1973), 485-501. Camille, 'Philobiblon', pp. 46-47, 53.

Literary allegory is not alone in this struggle with form, Teskey discusses 'the cultural work of allegory as a collective torturing of figurative meanings out of – or an imposing of them on – individual bodies, actual lives and historical events, urgent human aspirations, and the material world' (James Nohrnberg, 'Allegory Deveiled: A New Theory for Constructing Allegory's Two Bodies', *Modern Philology*, 96 (1998), 188-207 (p. 190)).

explore expressions of desires to make nature have meaning.⁹ And complex allegory, writes Teskey, entails an open expression of the force employed in making matter mean.¹⁰ Langland explores openly in his writing the difficulties of describing the body using abstract, general terms. The physical is a consistent presence in his writing through which words pass, but it remains elusive and unsettling: hidden behind words and signs, changed by them, reduced by them. His uses of the body to represent words show how incomplete the relationship between the two is. As a result, Langland shows the struggles between significance and things rather than just show things as reified abstracts. He shows how, when words meet bodies and the words intend to signify, bodies suffer.

The process of forcing meaning from the physical is pursued by *Spiritus fortitudinus* that has 'bete men ouere-bitere' (22.27) as a way of expressing its meaning on the world, or the papal bull wielded by the pardoner in the

⁹ Hence its importance to deconstructionist theory. See Hillis-Miller, 'The Two Allegories', Hillis-Miller compares Benjamin's concept of allegory as a ruin displaying the lack of meaning inherent to matter to Hegel's contention that it displays the concrete appearance of ideas. He writes '[i]n allegory, writing and personification reveal [...] the eternal disjunction between the inscribed sign and its material embodiment. It is writing, the characters written on nature as features are written on a face, which devastates it' (p. 365).

¹⁰ Langland is among the poets mentioned by Teskey when he says: 'The greatest allegorical poets do not simply transform life into meaning. They exacerbate the antipathy of the living to the significant by exposing the violence entailed in transforming the one into the other' (p. 24).

prologue.¹¹ The people shuffle up to the pardoner to kiss his *bulles* (balls),¹² and when they are close he hits them round the head with his letter until he has 'blered here yes' (Pr.72). These acolytes are thus forced to fuse the material thing with its illogical meaning (that it will 'assoylen hem alle | Of falsenesse of fastynge, of vowes ybrokene' Pr.68-69) through violence. Belief that an object could have an abstract meaning is painted here as a blindness in which sexually submissive people are the victims of force.¹³ Whipping in the classroom, Ralph Hanna has argued, was a 'sexualised gesture' in which the boy was emasculated in the process of learning.¹⁴ Dame Study makes references to her beatings with a 'baleyse' (11.121) to make children learn grammar. The structures that make meaning possible enter the poem as meanings enforced on one emasculated individual by another with a large stick.

¹¹ Need is not the most reliable of personifications but his way of talking is expressive of how the poem feels about the effect of a material abstraction on a body. For a discussion of the split critical understanding of Nede see Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith, "Nede ne hath no lawe", pp. 243-44, ns. 31-33. See also Jill Mann, 'The Nature of Need Revisited', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 18 (2004), 3-29 and Anne Middleton, 'Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version 'Autobiography' and the Statute of 1388', in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. by Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), pp. 208-317 (pp. 270-71); White, *Salvation*, p. 90, n. 3.

¹² See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 71: 'the contemptuously illogical plural admits the obscene pun'.

¹³ See Carruthers, *Search*, pp. 30-32. Shepherd, p. 198. The pilgrim's signs have no meaning neither do the names written in church windows (3.68-72). Malkin's maidenhood is interesting because it is its relation to her ugly body that makes it worthless (1.180).

¹⁴ Ralph Hanna III, 'School and Scorn: Gender in *Piers Plowman*', *New Medieval Literatures*, 3 (1999), 213-227. See also Hilmo, pp. 14-15. Hilmo comments on an illustration in Douce 104, fol. 52r, in which a school master energetically beats the bare arse of a child. Nothing else of the child's body can be seen, Hanna comments (without mentioning the illustration) that young boys were stripped of their tentative expressions of maleness (such as breeches) when they were whipped at school: 'the boy must bare his ass and turn away from the master. Not only is he denied face-to-face contact, but he also is reduced to a bare bottom, a posture which denies any sight of gender physically expressed, and he must stand subservient while he endures the rod of correction' (p. 219). The illustrator saw that learning was the exertion of power on emasculated boys.

Coercion into meaning takes several forms. In its most extreme case, articulated by Elaine Scarry, it is a torture that makes the body the source of a ruling ideology's realism.¹⁵ Scarry understands torture as a process that encloses a human and cancels their interior life.¹⁶ Victims of torture cannot describe their pain as it is inexpressible in language and when bereft of speech, to use Teskey's stark formulation, 'the body is meat'.¹⁷ Across this conveniently blank body the ideas of a political class are given a material basis.¹⁸ While the extremes of cruelty and horror described by Scarry are not apparent in *Piers*, violence within it denies speech to its victims and in doing so the poem engages with a medieval culture that saw its victims as hopelessly unable to speak for themselves.¹⁹ More allegorically, the body without language can be used as a symbol for the concepts necessary for power to maintain itself. The strange alchemy engineered by violence, Scarry explains, is that of taking the numinous of the physical and bending it through pain into an expression of the realness of

¹⁵ See Elaine Scarry *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)

¹⁶ Scarry writes that 'physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it' (p. 4).

¹⁷ Teskey, *Allegory*, p. 136; Scarry, p. 4.

¹⁸ Scarry writes that 'physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it' (p. 4).

¹⁹ See Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

a political concept.²⁰ After this process has taken place an ideological meaning supported by a body is read as a truth external to it. The meaning has, through violence, reached into bodies to extract something from them that it exhibits as a living expression of its own material reality. I will argue in this chapter that numerous allegorical passages in the poem are founded upon overt depictions of violence in which Langland shows powerful ideas enchainning the body into webs of conceptual meaning that act like allegories.

The body in *Piers* is made an enemy of human desires when it expresses concepts. The passages that I will examine posit the idea that behaviour that perfectly expresses a term can only be elicited from humans who are entrapped in their physical being by pain and suffering. Scarry delineates the idea that torture makes the body a prison in which the feelings of an individual are lost.²¹ And Langland makes repeated reference to the idea that an insistent body can push humans into correct behaviour by fiercely limiting them. This is a strange moment in his poetics as it achieves the aim I have been tracking throughout this thesis: articulating the body. The body in these passages is an insistent symbol because it overcomes consciousness and forces its experience upon a subject. But this process does not express that body because pain is inexpressible. Instead when we look at the body in the throes of agonising

²⁰ See Scarry, pp. 1-29, 48-9, 125-6. 'The felt characteristics of pain – one of which is its compelling vibrancy or its contestable reality or simply its 'certainty' – can be appropriated away from the body and presented as the attributes of something else (something which by itself lacks these attributes, something which does not itself appear vibrant, real, or certain)' (pp. 13-14). Robert Mills has used this idea, saying that the function of pain in representational contexts is to transfer 'the incontestable reality of the physical body' onto an 'institution, ideology, or cultural construct' (*Animation*, p. 119).

²¹ Scarry, pp. 28-38.

feeling the only way of understanding it is through references to other things.²²

And in the poem pained bodies are used repeatedly to express the veracity of other ideas, concepts, abstracts, and words.

The suffering bodies in the poem become symbols in a wider allegory decided by someone else (farming; a spiritual community). The subjects in pain only understand their distress in the context of other meanings. Seeing only their own bodies, they are encouraged to understand them as irrefutable evidence for their participation in wider structures of thought. So, Hunger drives the rural workers into accordance with Piers's agricultural ideals; Elde and illness make the people forget the thoughts they had in health and repent.

Langland is looking at a body whose physical density is its height and he has an intense and realistic engagement with the pain of the bodies depicted. But the extent of their suffering is not a portrait of the natural. Rather it is a presentation of how meaning perverts it. Poetry, politics, and idealism all evoke the realness of the body as evidence of their own truthfulness. In this evocation the natural state of embodiment is lost and matter emerges as a site of intense allegory and reading.

These violent moments add up to a discouraging poetic understanding of a body that can perhaps never be understood in its natural state. As with the gendered body, there is no physically naive 'before' to the bodies that we

²² Scarry, pp. 7-9. See also Ronald Melzack, 'The McGill Pain Questionnaire', in *Pain Measurement and Assessment*, ed. by Ronald Melzack (New York: Raven Press, 1983), pp. 41-47, pp. 41-42, and 'The McGill Pain Questionnaire: From Description to Measurement,' *Anesthesiology*, 103 (2005), 199-202, these articles delineate a questionnaire still widely used clinically to aid patients in description of pain; common to almost all words within it is a representation of the patient's pain as an external force that acts upon his or her body.

understand through the lens of discourse.²³ The body emerges in the parts of *Piers* I will discuss in this chapter as the site of intense figural expression.

Domestic Violence

Female victims of domestic violence in the poem reveal how meaning uses the body in pain as an unassailable basis for their own consistency. As part of a long intervention in the life of the community, Reason urges Tom Stow to take two sticks and fetch Felicity (his wife) from 'wyuen pyne' to be chastised in a more complete way at home (5.130-32).²⁴ Reason urges Bet to take a switch from a tree and to force Betty to work with it (5.135). He then moves on to edicts on the subjects of children – 'ho-so spareth the spryg spilleth here children' (5.138) – and criticism of the lives of churchmen. This homely violence is imagined, therefore, as part of a whole social network of improvement and presupposes that a woman's uninjured body undermines this perfect order.²⁵ The health of the woman is inversely proportional to the prosperity of the household.

²³ This speaks to Judith Butler in 'Critically Queer', *GLQ*, 1 (1993), 17-32. 'The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. This is a voluntarist account of gender which presumes a subject, intact, prior to its gendering' (p. 21). See also Bynum, 'Fuss', 2, note 2.

²⁴ The illustrator of Douce 104 is inspired by this promised retribution. An image of Tom with two huge sticks appears next to these words, fol. 23.r. Hilmo sees this as part of a larger conservatism in his choice of subject (p. 15).

²⁵ Such ideas were, of course, commonplace. See Bullough, 'Medical'; Emma Hawkes, 'The 'Reasonable' Laws of Domestic Violence in Late Medieval England', in *Domestic Violence*, ed. by Salisbury, Donavin, and Price, pp. 57-70. The idea that women were related to the flesh and men the spirit, and that women were deficient men (pp. 58-59) was commonplace. So this is another example of sexual metaphors allowing the imprint of meaning on flesh.

Scarry writes that terrible pain is frequently understood by non-victims through visualisation of the weapons used.²⁶ Reason's description of both weapons evokes strongly for the reader the effect they will have on whatever body they come into contact with. And in the angry welts that will appear on the backs of these women lies the material referent that makes their meaning in medieval society legible. They have been battered by Reason.²⁷ As such they become signs of what is reasonable. Medieval law read marital violence precisely as an expression of male rationality and feminine corruption. A medieval husband was expected by law not only to chastise his wife, but also to do so with the rationality that was seen as natural to him.²⁸ This had wider implications as the house was viewed as a man's microcosmic kingdom that synecdochically supported the ideals of medieval governance.²⁹ At the basis of these structures the woman's body provides proof in injury of a threat and its neutralisation. The woman herself, enclosed in her body by pain, acts in accordance with whatever edict will remove that pain and becomes a 'good' wife. Her body thus becomes a visceral material sign for an ideology that sees

²⁶ Scarry, p. 16.

²⁷ Aers identifies Reason as a problematic abstraction early in the poem as a solution to the problems raised by Holy Church's vague but strict understanding of social order; and order that does not accommodate reality: 'such disembodied and conventional abstractions may actually be controversial and equivocal terms with little obvious application to the world of incarnate beings Langland contemplates' (*Imagination*, p. 6).

²⁸ Hawkes explains how women were understood as literally less able to know what was 'reasonable chastisement' (p. 66).

²⁹ *Domestic Violence*, pp. 3, 5-6. 'If a man killed his wife, he committed murder; if a woman killed her husband, she committed petty treason' (p. 10).

itself as only articulating what is natural.³⁰ In violence her body is suspended between its debased natural state and the correct body it will become: a succinct expression of what is germane to both genders. This violence refuses to acknowledge individual desire, the realities of unhappy marriages, or (paradoxically) male savagery.³¹ Instead it writes different realities of marriage and points to the women's bodies as proof of its own correcting necessity.

The little allegory of the home creates meanings across women's bodies that bear no relation to how those bodies are outside the moment of violence. Incidentally it takes place between two condemnatory references to feminine attire. What we should be seeing in these references to chastised and unadorned woman, according to the representative logic I discuss in chapter 2, is real feminine flesh. But when we look under the *purfyel* and the *hod* we see bodies compromised by forceful cultural interpretations. This brief peek beneath cloth shows how difficult it is to see an unmediated body, even in an allegory where the author wants to use bodies as a basis for meaning.

³⁰ Christine de Pizan discusses domestic violence in her *City of Ladies* as a necessary endurance for a wife – an idea Salisbury, Donavin, and Llewelyn Price link to a *imitatio Christi*. So, even where a reaction to violence can be read as an empowering saintly indifference, women are transformed by their experience into something else. *Domestic Violence*, pp. 12-13.

³¹ This is clearly an allegory that suppresses everything discernible in reality and replaces it with its single concern. One 1395-96 prosecution cited by Hawkes, describes a woman forced to return to a husband from whom she fled in terror. The reality of her dire situation gives the lie to the law's enshrinement of male reason (pp. 63-64). Elizabeth Paston was beaten once or twice a day for a week by a mother desirous of her marriage to an elderly and ugly man, showing how personal desires were traduced by violence in bourgeois households. See Mary Carruthers, 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions', *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 209-222 (p. 214). Chaucer's Wife of Bath's mistreatment at the hands of her fifth husband Jankin is aimed both at making her understand her initial likeness to the dreadful women he reads about in *Adversus Jovinianum* and making her remorsefully alter herself. Jankin's failure is down to her unusually full expression of her own ideas and desires, though the lingering nature of her wound suggests she is marked by her brush with patriarchy (CT 3.636, 68).

The Violence of Hunger

Hunger is used by Piers in the poem to reinforce his allegory of the field.³²

Farming is the site of a material labour that replaces pilgrimage as the route to salvation in Piers's initial understanding.³³ Having rejected the signs of the pilgrim as way of creating meaning, he looks to the condition of the field and invests it with hopeful significance. The rural workers in this scene provide the support for an interpretation of a life of good labour in which food production leads to an understanding of truth. However, when the abstract ideals Piers hopes to find in the field are challenged by the complex dissonance of lived reality he finds he must enforce them with violence. In doing so he reveals how political and textual allegories come to rely on the physical to appear meaningful and that the relationship between the physical and the conceptual can be engineered by a force that does little to allow physical expression. This in turn describes how the politics of rural labour surrounding the poem used the evidence of hunger (an overwhelming bodily experience) to enforce the idea of its own stratification as necessary and good.

The field opens in a state of flux. The poem's allegory ebbs at this point

³² Jenkins described how the poem 'presents a world of compromise, confusion and frequent indifference to moral issues' that resists the idealising nature of many of its personifications as 'the collision of the allegorical and the literal becomes more complex and disturbing' – her reading informs this section ('Frustration', pp. 125, 127).

³³ See Burrow, 255-57; Mann, 'Langland and Allegory', pp. 27-29.

as Piers alters his ambition from the long journey to Truth into work on a field.³⁴

As he pauses in the mud the richness of Piers's reading of the countryside dissolves. He ceases to understand it according to the plethora of didactic names he has given to its everyday sites: a brook, 'Beth-buxom-of-speche' (7.213); a croft 'Coueyte-nat-menne-catel-ne-here-wyues', etc.(7.220-21); and two tree stumps, 'Stele-nat' and 'Sle-nat' (7.224).³⁵ Instead he sees these landmarks as just parts of the countryside and starts to understand the work necessary to living among them. In this apparent lacuna Langland needs the text to reach a new conclusion that accommodates the imperative of work for salvation. He therefore engineers a new allegory: one in which social forms take on meaning. This is enacted through a violence I discuss below involving the coercive deployment of Hunger. But it ultimately fails. The outcome is due to Piers's lack of certainty in forcing the necessary violence on the people which is expressive of Langland's feeling that this passage is only expressing meaning through suppressing the body. The body's wants are only explored through a pre-determined allegory that is forced on it. This does not form any part of the

³⁴ Hewett-Smith, 'Allegory', 4. For a counter-argument to the idea that allegory can be seen as limited at any point in the poem and not merely in a state that expresses 'the expansion of what allegory is and can be made to mean' see Andrew Cole, 'Scribal Hermeneutics and the Genres of Social Organization in *Piers Plowman*', in *The Middle Ages at Work: Practicing Labor in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Kellie Robertson and Michael Uebel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 179-206 (p. 183).

³⁵ Mann, 'Langland and Allegory', pp. 33-34. Mann notes that (while Piers is still describing the journey) 'it is the outer world (here, the fictional landscape) which becomes subservient to these sentences, its function being simply to articulate their relationship to each other' (p. 34). The potential independence of these syntactical units presupposes their being thrown off from the world – even taken as metaphors they are purely nominal – and so the erosion of metaphorical meaning in this scene is apposite when it occurs. See Mary Carruthers, 'Allegory Without the Teeth: Some Reflections on Figural Language in *Piers Plowman*', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 19 (2005), 27-43, for an interpretation that sees this journey as a useful word picture (pp. 38-39).

dialectic in which Langland understands words as passed through bodies as a means to expressing true meaning. Piers therefore ignores the advice of Hunger and feeds his workers. The passage ends in vagueness and ultimately a rejection of work.

In a later addition to the C-text, the apologia of passus 5, Will is questioned and urged to work by Conscience and Reason. Anne Middleton has argued that this questioning represents a staging of 'an incipient prosecution under the 1388 Statute [of Labourers], on grounds of idleness'.³⁶ Middleton's reading of this statute posits it as an unlikely unification of opposed 'voices, interests, and enforcement protocols' around the figure of the vagrant (a personage seen as both violent and mendacious, whose characterisation unified several imagined social undesirables).³⁷ The vagrant focussed ire on a single figure personified in law that Will represents in this questioning. Reason, Conscience, and Will are part of a coherent dialogue surrounding a series of social forms reified in allegorical figures.³⁸ This is not the case in the field. Argument is lost in a rapidly unravelling disaster. A clear moral imperative does not arise. In comparison with the later revision, the field is caught between undefined allegorical forms. It contains the organising principle of a far less

³⁶ Middleton, 'Vagrancy', p. 245.

³⁷ Middleton, 'Vagrancy', p. 245.

³⁸ Reason and Conscience are not prey to the allegorical confusion of numerous other personifications. Middleton calls them 'those two root principles of all English legal and juridical theory, and hence the roots of legitimacy itself' ('Acts', p. 275). Though he is assertively workless and rootless, Will is nevertheless clearly defined in relation to the 1388 Statute and by the poem that sits between the *apologia* and his encounter with Need in passus 22 ('Acts', pp. 247, 260, 275); he signals precisely what escapes the constraining limits of the law – and the poem itself stands for the creative principle that escapes its constraints. Its form mimics the struggle of its birth represented here.

definitive statute; its frame is a discarded allegorical premise; and the ruling personification has a shifting and diverse meaning. The result is that it offers readers a perspective into the struggle endemic to making allegories. Unlike the *apologia*, none of its ideas or speakers precede it as formed entities. It is profoundly involved in its own allegorical makings,³⁹ foremost of which is the fact that diverse ideas must be constrained into monolithic forms as a prelude to an allegorical narrative. At the basis of this constraint is violence.

Piers's presence in the poem is elusive and representative on multiple levels.⁴⁰ He is not an orthodox personification such as Reason and Conscience but a persona whose role is at times uncertain even to him. Originating as a plowman who knows Truth, his behaviour is initially didactic. But as he alters in the poem he adopts the identity of a distant and disguised Christ. He expresses the latent capacity of man to imitate the divine.⁴¹ As that representation depends on achieving a truthfulness within the self incommensurate with allegorical and social forms, it is unsurprising that he fails to organise an appropriate social or textual allegory in the field.

The ploughing begins with a portentous loss of personnel. Having heard of Piers's intended journey a *cotte-pors*, a *hapeward*, and a *wafrestere* decline to join him (7.283-86). Piers pokes them all 'to-gode' (7.287) but Actif offers a

³⁹ The representation of Will in passus 5 engages the text with the concept of its making as work, but not with its modes of representation (which are interrogated here).

⁴⁰ See Woolf, 'Non-Medieval', 113; Mary Clemente Davlin, 'Petrus, Id Est, Christus: Piers the Plowman as The Whole Christ', *The Chaucer Review*, 6 (1972), 280-292 (p. 283). For Davlin, Piers represents: 'man, Peter, pope, Christ, God, the Church, the Christian' (p. 291).

⁴¹ For Davlin Piers displays the need for mankind to identify with Christ and the mystery through which the incarnation divinizes all humanity ('Petrus', pp. 283, 285, 288).

rejoinder that reminds Piers of the necessities of living – a jealous wife (7.299-304a). These highly social characters have seen the idealising principle in operation in the field and turn away back to their varied problems and enjoyments. The only eager companion is Contemplation, a personification that reinforces the idealistic nature of Piers's hopes. These emerge in the perfect rural society that Piers establishes.⁴² He explains to the women that their purpose is to sew: plebeian women work the 'sak' while the aristocratic have 'selk and sendel' (8.7-14). The knight's role is explained in punishing detail: he must police the commons, but must be meek, he must hunt but should be merciful, he must refuse gifts, but must be courteous, he must reject tale-tellers, but listen to stories about battles and truthfulness (8.23-53).⁴³ Piers's role is to provide food (8.69-70). Those who have no place in his allegory are duly removed from it: 'Iacke the iogelour and Ionet of the stuyues | And Danyel the dees-playere and Denote the baude | And Frere Faytour [...] | And Robyn the rybauder' (8.71-75). And Piers turns to his family, whose excessively abstract tag-names signal that in the field naming is synonymous with purely verbalised ideals and not material reality:

⁴² Andrew Cole argues that Piers represents an 'overseer': an urban post concerning labour regulation well-known to clerks tasked with creating order out of disorder; they dealt, essentially, with dysfunction, 'Scribal Hermeneutics', p. 193; Hewett-Smith calls Piers's grouping 'what he believes is an ideal worldly social system' ('Allegory', p. 5); Bloomfield argues that 'Langland viewed society as a precisely articulated institution with each part performing its proper function and thereby realizing its perfection' (*Apocalypse*, p. 102), see also pp. 103-4; Aers, *Imagination*, p. 14.

⁴³ The poem adds other idealistic weight to the shoulders of the knight in knighthood's close relationship to Conscience, Kynde Wit, and the king in the establishment of a good society (Pr.143); Holy Church says knights should ride about and 'take *transgressoures* and teyen hem faste' and that they should be true in their fighting or be 'appostata of knyghthed' (1.91-2, 96-8); Recklessness argues that a knight should pay his way through private means, or be brave enough to advance through prowess (13.108-111).

Dame Worche-when-tyme-is Peres wyf hehte;
 His douhter hihte Do-rihte-so-or-thy-dame-shal-the-bete;
 His Sone hihte Soffre-thy-souereynes-haue-her-wille-
 Deme-hem-nat-for-yf-thow-doest-thow-shalt-hit-der-abygge. (8.80-83)

Piers imagines initially that names and social identities (the knight or Robyn the rybauder) give ample information about an individual. This is a very textual way of thinking. He creates a pattern in which he expects words to stay true to material reality. But he will discover that this strict relationship can only be assured if those words are forced into being through violence.

Piers wishes the majority of his labourers to act as *communes*, the most hardworking and least remunerated of all social units.⁴⁴ Piers appears to take inspiration from the speech in passus 5 where Reason urges:

ryche
 And comuners [...] acorde in alle kyn treuthe.
 Lat no kyne consayl ne couetyse yow parte,
 That o wit and o wil al youre wardes kepe.
 Lo! in heuene an heyh was an holy comune
 Til Lucifer the lyare leued that hym sulue
 Were wittiore and worthiore then he that was his maister.
 Holde yow in vnite, and he that other wolde
 Is cause of alle combraunces to confounde a reume. (5.182-90)

Reason's language is unequivocal. His injunction that one *wit* and *wil* are imposed on the people contextualizes Hunger's violence. There is no room here for dissent or individual desire. He imagines those with power and those without as working together like the flame of spirit upon body or Lechery with his mate (16.180; 6.81, see pp. 21-22): that is, he sees the unification of concept and matter as a question of the ruling classes providing ideas and the workers

⁴⁴ Aers comments on Langland's depictions of social organisation as conveying 'his wish for the coherent world depicted in the inherited organic ideology' (*Imagination*, p. 4)

providing the material. As was the case in domestic violence, Reason is here to legitimise the organisation of bodies through 'rational' force. But while he argues in favour of a society where the rule of a beneficial law is enforced, he is still unable to observe how the complexities of human embodiment might make this move impossible. When Piers is discussing governance with Hunger, he wryly observes that 'Hit is nat for loue, leue it, thei laboure thus faste | But for fere of famyen, in fayth' (8.213-14). Reason, who is shown to have a greater affinity with the instinctual psychology of animals, has clearly not anticipated the human problems that might arise from imposing perfect unity of purpose between people.

Piers examines the labourers at noon and sees a group who ignore his edicts; he is faced with a crowd of delightfully scurrilous ruffians. The poem gives centre-stage to their vitality. David Aers writes 'the poetry carries an energy and conviction in the 'wastours' defiance which is not matched in [...] any realisation of the normative paradigm': their insults are more entertaining than their work.⁴⁵ They sing 'hey trollilolly!' (8.123); lay 'here legges alery' (8.129); Wastour tells Piers to 'go pisse with his plogh' (8.151); and a bragging Bretoner openly boasts about his disobedience: 'Wolle thow, nulle thow [...] we wol haue oure wille' (8.153). In this lively scene Piers's abstract ideals melt. They become a series of empty words that float away in the face of an indifferent crowd. Against the enjoyable unconcern of the wasters Piers's efforts look shrill.

⁴⁵ Aers, *Imagination*, p. 16.

When he asks the knight to help, all of his pronouncements on knightly duty are duly effaced. The knight is unable to keep them all in his mind (fierce, meek, deadly, merciful) and instead acts in accordance with his *kynde* and courteously asks that Wastour work (8.161).⁴⁶ He is given short shrift and simply fades from the poem.⁴⁷ Using his *kynde* courtesy, the knight reminds Piers of what is not yet present in the field. He has created a beautiful order but has not incorporated anything natural or real. *Kynde* things are associated with the natural in the poem, and in Middle English with 'the innate, experiential, practical, biological, or basically human'.⁴⁸ *Kynde* also implies a suffering in nature that cleanses, an experiential link between man and Christ, and acts of *kyndenness* that express 'an essential unity of the human and divine' while *unkynde* things are perverse, deformed, against nature.⁴⁹ Hugh White suggests that the *kynde* in man leads to sins of the flesh, but that these are mitigated by their association with the natural.⁵⁰ Piers has therefore placed his people in a false position. The *kynde* aspects of the knight take precedence over the learned behaviour Piers urges and suggest that the society idealised by him is unachievable because experience dictates otherwise.

⁴⁶ Frank describes him as a 'Bertie Wooster aristocrat' ('Gap', p. 101).

⁴⁷ He fades in his illustration in Douce 104 as well. His figure is not coloured and is only rendered in faint pencil markings. He does not wear armour but the fashionable clothes of a courtier, Douce fol. 35v.

⁴⁸ MED, 'kinde' n., 2a. The dreamer explains his inabilities to work as intimately related to his *kynde* bearing.

⁴⁹ White, p. 110; Zeeman, *Desire*, pp. 157-244, esp. pp. 159-62; Mary Clemente Davlin, 'Kynde Knowyng as a Major Theme in Piers Plowman B', *The Review of English Studies*, n.s. 22 (1971), 1-19.

⁵⁰ White, pp. 91-92.

In desperate anger, Piers calls on Hunger, whose actions inject the scene with a fully articulated bodily reality that strives to suggest the field has links with what is *kynde*.

Hunger in haste tho hente Wastour by the mawe
 And wronge hym so by the wombe that al watrede his yes.
 A boffatede the Bretoner aboute the chekes
 That a lokede lyke a lanterne al his lyf aftur,
 And beet hem so bothe he barste ner her gottes
 Ne hadde Peres with a pese-loof preyede hym bileue. (8.171-76)

In this attack the workers become enclosed by hunger in their own pain.

Wastour is transformed from a loudmouth to a silent victim of Hunger's torture.

Like the victims of the prologue's pardoner his eyesight becomes obscured as he is inducted into new ways of seeing. Hunger's violence changes these figures' understanding of the world. Their bodies signify Hunger as a deeply felt physical experience akin to the pain of torture. It makes marks on the body that never fade. We see the rounded belly and gaunt cheeks of starvation.

In these lines we find an accurate rendition of Hunger bought about through the evocation of violence. Robert Worth Frank has noted the frequency of bad harvests that occurred throughout Langland's probable lifespan and described them as involving the same physically degrading details (and worse consequences Langland doesn't mention).⁵¹ Hunger's attack, here, speaks to the helplessness of victims of famine and the feelings hunger elicits of a body working against itself.

Hunger is not a metaphor for spiritual considerations, as R. E. Kaske and

⁵¹ Frank, 'Gap', 87-97.

others have it, but a description of an embodied experience.⁵² Kathleen Hewett-Smith has noted how threatening this personification of hunger is and compares him to the female Hunger in the *Roman de la Rose*: a starving woman.⁵³ She reads the attack of Hunger as a breakdown of the abstraction necessary to allegory. It is the emergence, for her, of 'what is least figural in our experience – our bodies' and she writes that Hunger himself acts to 'deflate the mode of signification' as he stops this scene offering any other meaning than an elucidation of painful hunger.⁵⁴ I agree that this attack is a scene of strongly expressed physical experience, but I think it shows how Hunger enforces an allegorical schema.

Hunger is indicative of the dissonance between real bodies and the social and semantic structures they are made to inhabit. That is, he is the means through which Piers forces the workers to adhere to his abstract schemes. As such, he shows how allegory is based on an intense figuralization of what seem to us natural experiences.

Langland's references to contemporary politics have been discussed at length.⁵⁵ But, briefly, the wasters in the poem refer to the empowerment of

⁵² See R. E. Kaske, 'The Character Hunger in *Piers Plowman*', in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. by E. D. Kennedy, and others (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988), pp. 187-97. Robertson and Huppé see the passus as allegorically illustrative of a process in which Piers is helping men 'cultivate their own hearts' (pp. 82-91).

⁵³ Hewett-Smith, 'Allegory', 9-10, 19.

⁵⁴ Hewett-Smith, 'Allegory', 10.

⁵⁵ Hewett-Smith, 'Allegory', 6-8; Robert W. Frank Jr., 'The Hungry Gap,' Crop Failure and Famine: The Fourteenth-Century Agricultural Crisis and *Piers Plowman*, 'Yearbook of Langland Studies, 4 (1990), 84-104; Aers, *Imagination*, pp. 1-37, 'Visionary Eschatology', 3-5; Zeeman, *Desire* pp. 195-200; Middleton, 'Vagrancy'.

agricultural labourers following the fall in population that accompanied the Black Death.⁵⁶ Scarcity of manpower meant wages could be argued, and labourers travelled widely between employers to find the best employment.⁵⁷ The Ordinance of Labourers of 1349 and the 1351 Statute of Labourers speak to the anxiety generated by the labouring class's new demands.⁵⁸ They were designed to enforce service to a local landowner for specific periods of time, to return wages to rates common in 1346, and to limit the prices of food.⁵⁹ In attempting to force a return to the social past after it has been fundamentally eradicated, the lawmakers of the mid-Fourteenth Century show an allegorising

⁵⁶ Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 197-210.

⁵⁷ See Simon A. C. Penn and Christopher Dyer, 'Wages and Earnings in Late Medieval England: Evidence from the Enforcement of the Labour Laws', *The Economic History Review*, 43 (1990), 356-376. Problems raised by the new shortage in the workforce were not all new, but the conditions of work after the plague favoured employees who already held many professions and whose work depended on seasonal demand. In the new demographic landscape workers could earn through a series of different jobs at different times of year. The laws introduced to curb such practices highlight them – land owners and gentry wanted to employ individuals on yearly contracts that left them earning little for large periods. Instead workers, especially ploughmen and harvesters, travelled widely to supplement their seasonal incomes. Evidence also points to the fact that many jobs were taken on by untrained novices as expertise had also been widely affected by the fall in population.

⁵⁸ See L. R. Poos, 'The Social Context of Statute of Labourers Enforcement', in *Law and History Review*, 1 (1983), 27-52. Poos argues that the Statute was enforced by local officials as well as by the ruling classes, and that its use evinces social control operating within communities as much as it was exercised on them from above. This perhaps makes sense of Piers's authoritative position in the Half Acre, but it remains true that even if the law was enforced communally, it emanated from the top. Those who enacted the Statute locally often benefitted personally from it, Piers's dissatisfaction with his role in the Half Acre results from the fact that he cannot carry it out altruistically.

See Penn and Dyer who argue that employers were not a homogenous group, but that complex webs of employment operated around the hiring of an unskilled workforce (p. 372). See also B. H. Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statute of Labourers During the First Decade After The Black Death: 1349-1359* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), pp. 1-7 for a description of the links between the Black Death and the Statute. The severity of the catastrophe facing the rural labour market is underlined by the fact that this was the first ever legislation from central authority to impose uniform wages and prices (p. 3), and by the fact that parliament was recalled for the first time since the plague to discuss this issue (p. 2).

⁵⁹ Poos, 29.

turn.⁶⁰ Instead of reading the situation as it actually existed, those with vested interests in maintaining a pre-plague society tried to alter it by force. They took the population and made them conform to desired roles in the social order in much the same way as allegory makes material things show certain meanings in a conceptual, literary order.

Contemporary records reveal that landowners and employees used the statute primarily to police the fine line between their own and others' attempts to attract a workforce. Where their own offerings (which broke the law) were overborne by temptations from elsewhere, they would use the force of the statute to intervene and punish their neighbours. In this complex system of reward and retributive action the worker was the butt as it was he or she who would pay the fine imposed for receiving excess wages. What also emerges from records is a sense of the exhilarating uses of freedom by people who had been used to harsh physical labour.⁶¹ In many cases, the workers would truly rather be idle. The case of John Hogyn illustrates this, he was a 'disturber of the peace' prosecuted for vagabondage in 1371 who did not want to work and

⁶⁰ This same turn is legible in the 1388 legislation that Middleton links to the dreamer's *apologia*. She writes that Langland's poetic reflection on the law 'suggests that the vagrancy law of 1388 [...] was a bold act of projective imagination rather than an achievable regulation. The Statute may thus itself be regarded as a product of a cultural imaginary, a fantasy of the power and authority of the administrative state to secure both legible individual identity and a stable social totality – a fantasy that was as seductively unreal as any of Langland's, and far less benign' ('Vagrancy', p. 216). The same fantastical ideals of identities within a totality could be attached to Langland's depiction of the earlier legislation here (the 1388 statute postdates the likely date of this section of the poem) and Hunger is the material basis for this destructive fantasy.

⁶¹ We cannot be entirely sure, though, that some impressions of people taking short-term labour do not arise from gaps in the records, Penn and Dyer, 368-69.

instead slept all day and visited the tavern all night to play 'penyprick'.⁶²

Intriguingly, ploughmen seem especially to have indicated a preference for autonomy of action over constraint in a monotonous and physically demanding profession.⁶³ They were particularly footloose.⁶⁴ The result was landowners trying to tempt them into their service with increasingly wild offers of money and benefits.⁶⁵ Some historians suggest that people accepted a lowering of their living standards as an adequate trade-off for a life of greater freedom and autonomy.⁶⁶ This evidence suggests, I think, the distance between the statute and the reality of people's daily lives. It is doubly fictional. It represents an ideal of rural life and the controlling capabilities of power that even those in charge knew to be far from the truth: instead of forcing people into work they tried to tempt them.⁶⁷ Additionally it shows that what people truly valued was their freedom from restraints. As the episode of the Half-Acre demonstrates, forcing

⁶² *Proceedings Before the Justices* ed. by B. H. Putnam, pp. 207-8, cited in Penn and Dyer (p. 366).

⁶³ The depiction of the hardships of ploughing are evocatively described in *Piers the Ploughman's Crede*, ll. 298-300.

⁶⁴ Penn and Dyer (p. 362).

⁶⁵ Wild in the sense that they pushed the boundaries between social estates. In one case, a ploughman is almost elevated to the position of domestic servant by the addition of cash, hay, pasture, white bread and ale to his income. Where hired workers are given grazing rights, it suggests a desire to emulate tenants, Penn and Dyer, p. 371.

⁶⁶ A behaviourist approach argues that as wages climbed, people did not accumulate wealth but days off, living to the same standards but with the benefit of free-time. Penn and Dyer (p. 374).

⁶⁷ See Kellie Robertson, 'Branding and the Technologies of Labor Regulation', in *The Middle Ages at Work*, ed. by Robertson and Uebel, pp. 133-153. Significantly, the Commons petitioned for more visible public corporal punishment to be included in the 1351 statute, which legislated for display in stocks for those not complying (p. 134); A 1361 statute stipulated labourers found outside their locale should be branded on the forehead with a letter 'F' for falsity (p. 136). Robertson relates branding to performativity and the production of culturally legible bodies, peasants became: 'a walking allegory for falsity' (p. 138). She sees the illustrations in the Luttrell Psalter as the same kind of myth-making as is enacted by Piers – the image an ideal workforce (pp. 145-46).

people to do something will always meet with profound resistance. This resistance, I feel, is germane to allegory as it is the resistance of matter to meaning. People and things will not act according to a fictional design unless forced.

Hunger in this context represents an ideal as it reverses neediness from landowners onto those they seek to employ. In a system where they could always find work it was not the field hands who had to fear Hunger but the communities their employers were responsible for. Hunger effects a transferral of care onto those people who seem otherwise to have been free of such anxieties – much as the Statute made them pay for the excess wages cooked up by employers desperate for workers. Once the harvest has come in the workers, in their freedom:

corseth the kyng and alle the kynges justices,
 Suche lawes to lerne, laboreres to greue.
 Ac whiles Hunger was here maistre ther wolde non chyde
 Ne stryue ayeynes his statuyt, a lokede so sturne. (8.337-340)

Hunger provides relief to the problems of a rural community in which there are too few workers to feed the population.

In Piers's behaviour we can read the same logical turn as the Statute of Labourers in which work, duration, and remuneration were fixed in advance of the evidence of demand and inclination.⁶⁸ In addition, he stratifies the people in ways that accord with the well-attested division of people required by the major

⁶⁸ For a discussion that characterizes the way people were legally 'captured' in the late fourteenth century see Middleton, 'Vagrancy', pp. 216-46.

ideologies of late-fourteenth-century society.⁶⁹ The potential problems with this control over people become apparent when people object to what has been decided for them. The lack of realism inherent to the system is revealed when it has to be violently enforced. Hunger dramatises that this violence need not be overt punishment but can be more insidious: withholding food. This strategy is explicitly mentioned in the Ordinance of Labourers as one means via which the wealthy can keep the poor desperate and in correct subjugation to their desires:

None vppon the sayde payne of ymprysonment shall vnder the colour of pitie or almes gyue ony thyng to suche whiche may labour or presume to fauour them towards theyre desyres, so that thereby they may be compelled to labour for theyr necessary liuyng.⁷⁰

Lawrence Clopper writes that, according to these statutes, 'those who do not labor – nobles and prelates – ordained that certain persons should labour'.⁷¹ He notes that there is no easy answer in the poem to whether 'men and women must labour for their needs'.⁷² In a society where a small group control and ordain the experiences of most, hunger was summoned and dismissed as a

⁶⁹ See Aers, *Imagination*, pp. 2-4: '[t]he leading ideology [...] made the inherited social world, with its distribution of power, work and wealth, so natural that any opposition to it seemed monstrous, as well as iniquitous' (p. 3).

⁷⁰ *The great book of statutes* (London, 1524-33; STC 9286, E.vi-F.iv), cited by Clopper, p. 118. Middleton also cites this aspect of the Ordinance, arguing that it marks the first arrival of the issue of sturdy beggars in law – an issue that was to become a 'political *bête noir*' by the time of the 1388 second Statute of Labourers (p. 229). Begging is more of an individual failing here than a damaging group activity but by the second Statute, vagabonds have been made into a definitive category of offenders: a 'complex ideological invention' (p. 229). In society, then, this pronouncement had the effect of laying the foundation for the damaging delineation of vagrants which became a legal personification engineered to enable social control: a concept violently enforced.

⁷¹ Clopper, p. 118.

⁷² Clopper, p. 110.

means of coercion.⁷³ Hunger answered the question many were asking: should I work? But it did not do so naturally. Worth notes that famine is not a purely natural catastrophe (as Langland gestures at the end of the vision) but one that foregrounds the weaknesses inherent in the society it effects.⁷⁴ Namely, food distribution. The same 'problem' is a useful tool in Piers's society. He holds the food and so scarcity creates a need he can exploit. The workers' bodies are manipulated.

When Piers talks to Hunger it seems strange (if he is read as a personification like Hunger in the *Rose*) that he mentions so much about the relief of hunger. But in doing so he is pursuing his role as a controlling principle. Piers gives 'liflode' for labour (8.196). And Hunger endorses this:

Bolde beggares and bygge that mowe here breed byswynke,
With houndes bred and hors breed hele them when thei hungren
And baue hem with benes for bollyng of here wombe;
And yf the gromes gruche, bide hem go and swynke
And he shal soupe swettere when he hit hath deserued. (8.223-27)

He urges Piers keep his people from the overt signs of malnutrition (the evocative rounded stomach); but makes sure his charity will not go so far as to stop them working. Hunger says of those that 'wolde nat swynke | That here lyflode be lene and lyte worth here clothes' (8.261-62). Food, in Hunger's logic, is a coercive tool to be used to control people. To make them work. The 'lawe of kynde' (8.230), he notes, urges men to provide for the needy – but while it may

⁷³ Frank points out how the wealthy were unaffected by the famines that ravaged the rest of the population. Their response was to batten down the hatches and lay as many people off (to starve) as possible, keeping food for themselves (p. 99). He points to Patience's condemnation of such practices.

⁷⁴ Worth, 100.

be natural to 'bear one another's burdens' this action must be related to a complex set of rules deciding who can and cannot work.⁷⁵ Hunger, by this point, is very far away from a natural characteristic. He is, rather, the embodiment of a pain that forces people to give their bodies to meaning.

Hunger has been generally accepted as problematically coercive without a focus from critics on how he represents a social rather than natural process.⁷⁶ Instead they have seen the natural link between fear of hunger and agricultural work, understanding hunger to be an obvious corollary to laziness. Rather than outright attacking the wasters and making an example of the use of force to inscribe government ideology, Piers does at first seem to be engineering a naturally occurring process that displays to the workers the common sense behind the need for them to join in with the harvest. His is the voice of exasperated virtue. However, it soon becomes apparent that Piers is in complete control of the hunger of the workers. Hunger is at the point of bursting the guts of the Bretener and Wastour when Piers holds him off with his *pese-loof*. There is something more than a natural process occurring here (in terms of 'abandon the harvest and you will die of starvation'). What Piers shows in 'relenting' is that the arrival of Hunger is not a bodily experience the workers must endure and

⁷⁵ See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 320*a*. Hunger quotes from Gal. 6:2.

⁷⁶ Frank explains that 'Piers's summons is only a reminder of the omnipresent fact of Hunger' ('Gap', p. 97). Robertson and Huppé argue that the passage 'shows that Hunger will force men to work through false fear of temporal harm' (p. 82). Hewett-Smith writes that Hunger's 'allegorical nature is tied to a literal reality that might affect each of us [...] he is an inescapable reality [...] [t]he workers' motivation is entirely self-directed, physical, material, and [...] justified' ('Allegory', pp. 10, 11, 12-13). Jill Mann writes that 'Hunger cannot be summoned and dismissed as morally appropriate even though his role may have a morally appropriate effect (the punishment of wasters)' ('Eating', p. 29).

from which they alone can save themselves, but that there are powers within the agricultural scene that can decide who will starve and who will be helped. In other words, starvation is deliberately kept as an internal force in a system via which a rural workforce is made to work.⁷⁷ In feudalism, Aers writes, the 'peasant population [is] made obedient through living on the brink of starvation'.⁷⁸ It is not logically the case that they produce food and then fill themselves, but that they are organised in such a way that they disproportionately and unfairly suffer from the effects of food distribution and this is how they are forced to work. Middleton comments, of late fourteenth-century society, that:

the ritual adversion to 'need' in sociopolitical discourse, and the sanctioned forms of social response to it, tended in fact to patrol and maintain rather than dissolve the social boundaries that secured the distribution of economic and symbolic goods, and of social power.⁷⁹

Ideas of people as each other's 'bloody brethren' (8.216) underwrote concepts of charity but ways of responding to need were coded.⁸⁰ Hunger describes relief as a highly effective means of maintaining the boundaries between workers and those organising and disciplining them. And in order to know who should be

⁷⁷ See Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2008): 'there is a 'symbolic' violence enacted in language and all its forms [...] this violence is not only at work in the obvious – and extensively studied – case of incitement and of the relations of social domination reproduced in all our habitual speech forms: there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning' (p. 1).

⁷⁸ Aers, pp. 17-18.

⁷⁹ Middleton, p. 242.

⁸⁰ Aers asks whether the concept of bloody brethren is 'a pious formula applying only to practices in some safely remote celestial region? Langland wanted the idea to have an impact, yet he wanted to preserve an order antagonistic to such ideas'. (*Imagination*, p. 19)

the recipient of this discipline Piers turns to his own social allegory and the figures in the field who represent an intervention so disruptive they deserve starvation. In making them hungry he makes them obvious signs of his allegory: the indigent poor who underwrite it; the vagabonds who will not work and so are rejected by society's aid. Piers used force to create patterns. His society is a hierarchy of readable bodies and forms, not the indeterminate soup of brotherhood. It resembles allegorical poetry – it is able to speak eloquently of the world, but only a world it has invented.

Piers rejects this scene, he asks Hunger to leave (8.298-99). He and the other workers join forces in filling Hunger in order to gain their freedom (8.315-323). As a result a generalised and undifferentiated field emerges around the figure of Hunger whose agency is reversed – he now asks to be fed. Need without discourse – signified by a single, hungry belly – arises and unites the people. When Hunger is full, the people return to idleness (8.324-33), a state that is frustrating for the organisation of the field but suggests the expression of their true desires (and the fact that the great work of the harvest has finished). With the people in such comfortable disarray the poem's focus on society fades, there is no way of representing a scene like this in allegory. Piers leaves on pilgrimage. One type of allegory is over in the poem.

The Barn of Unity

The final vision engages the people in a far more complex social allegory than previously encountered in the poem.⁸¹ Replacing Piers's field, in which the ties between work and spiritual progress were loosely articulated, the field surrounding the Barn of Unity has a detailed and full conceptual understanding of ploughing. It is designed by Piers and Grace working together. Within it the people have roles denoted by Grace, who engenders skill and sensuality to enable good works.⁸² The plough in this field is written over with text – Biblical and patristic – and Piers sows the cardinal virtues into the ground before he makes a barn with a book as its roof (presumably the book's spine is the roof's ridge) in which to store them (21.327).⁸³ This conceptual edifice is beautiful but the poem strongly suggests it is an image of ideal order that has to be tested in order to have a meaning other than the purely abstract.⁸⁴ And when the people test it, it breaks.

Once the field's rickety allegory is complete Pride swiftly approaches it

⁸¹ See Middleton, 'Acts', p. 269; Hewett-Smith, 'Nede', p. 240-41. Both comment on the developments between the visions.

⁸² On the role of predestination and the influence of Pelagianism in the poem and their intersections with good work see Denise N. Baker, 'From Ploughing to Penitence: *Piers Plowman* and Fourteenth-Century Theology', *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 715-725 (p. 716, n. 4); Robert Adams, 'Piers's Pardon and Langland's Semi-Pelagianism', *Traditio*, 39 (1983), 367-418 (p. 367 n.8 and pp. 382-83); James Simpson '*Piers Plowman*': *An Introduction* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007), pp. 58-64; White, p. 34, n.72, n.73.

⁸³ This may be an allusion to the Augustinian motif of the sky as a codex book, see *Confessions*, XIII, xv.

⁸⁴ See Aers, *Imagination*, pp. 24, 32-33. Aers argues that Langland discloses in these scenes: 'how a view of human morality and nature, assumed in traditional paradigms, is in danger of being subverted by actual social practice' (p. 33).

with a 'grete oeste' comprising Surquidous, Spille-loue, and Speke-euele-bihynde (21.339-40). The threat presented by these attackers is that they will dismantle and obscure the allegory of the field. And slowly the people begin to peel away from the design suggested by Grace. First 'commune women' (22.367); then 'a sisour and a sompnour that weren forsworen ofte' (22.369); then 'a breware' (22.396) who points out to Conscience the gulf between lived experience and his ideal:

Y wol nat be yruled,
By Iesu! for al youre iangelyng, aftur *Spiritus iusticie*
Ne aftur Conscience, bi Crist, while Y can sulle
Bothe dregges and draf and drawe at on hole
Thikke ale and thynne ale; and that is my kynde
And nat to hacky aftur holinesse – hold thy tonge. (21.396-401)

Not only does this brewer make note of how he can cheat people easily – a fact that obviously means he will because of its immediate benefits⁸⁵ – he also makes reference, like the knight, to his own *kynde*.⁸⁶ He rejects ideas that his *kynde* is to resemble Christ, going so far as to characterise the project of faith as a pointless and demeaning task.⁸⁷ This elucidation of 'the darker side of *kynde*' is extremely troubling at this point in the poem.⁸⁸ It comes directly after the sacrifices of Christ's life have been re-presented to the people in terms of a eucharistic feast

⁸⁵ Aers argues he is one of those in 'a mass of self-absorbed social practices in which there is no conception of any coherent order, organic unity or social *telos*. The participants [...] appear to be discrete members of a mobile, fragmentary society revelling in processes of consumption and production which are an end in themselves' (*Imagintation*, p. 5).

⁸⁶ Covetousness's wife practices the same deception (6.226). See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 6.226.

⁸⁷ See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 401. Pearsall links the digging of 'hacky aftur' to the moat Conscience urges the people to dig around the Barn at line 21.365.

⁸⁸ White, p. 89.

(21.383-85).⁸⁹ The brewer is suggesting that he has not only not been redeemed by his fleshy association with the divine, but that his natural understanding and experience lead him towards trickery and deception of his fellows. This foregrounds the idea that the natural is not present in the structures of belief presented by the field's complex allegory. It posits the *kynde* as not only unaffected by dictums but also playfully refracting away from their ideals into avenues of deceit. This, I think, reflects its uneasy relationship with representation. The absurdity with which the brewer rejects the field ('Ye? bawe!' 21.396) and his prosaic focus on mixing the ale bring deflating bathos to the scene. In trying to match the extraordinary elevation of the natural achieved by the appearance of God within it, Grace is caught short by one of the myriad ways in which experience can assert its variety. Indeed, his efforts are recast and reread. His understanding of digging as a beautiful communal effort that reflects mutual concern and protection from evil is seen by the brewer as grubbing around in the soil: an act both dirty and silly. In both cases people are asserting what the land itself represents. The radically different meanings they emerge with display the complete indifference of the actual earth to both. It offers no support to either reading – the natural slips out of allegorical design again.

The field's allegory must thus become acutely aware of what it lacks. This complex edifice bears no relation to the natural predisposition of things or

⁸⁹ Conscience's excessively basic reading of the Eucharist 'here is bred yblessed and godes body therunder' 21.385 might be a way of explaining the mysteries involved to the unlearned – if so, it spectacularly backfires.

people. It is a preconceived grid in which perfect order has been imagined but into which the people will not come of their own volition.

The *lewed vicory* who speaks after Conscience's comprehensive condemnation of the brewer – '[b]ote thow lyue bi lore of *Spiritus iusticie*, | [...] ysaued worst thou neuere' (21.405-6) – offers a clear-sighted critique of the field's allegorising turn⁹⁰. He begins with a rueful deflation of Conscience's idealism '[t]henne is many a lyf ylost' (21.409) that speaks to his experience of people's daily spiritual struggles (or lack of them). This tone continues as he gives Conscience a wry delineation of his experience of people:

For the comune [...] counteth ful litel
The counseyl of Conscience or cardinales vertues
Bote hit sowne, as bi sihte, somewhat to wynnyng.
Of gyle ne of gabbyng gyueth they neuer tale
For *Spiritus prudencie* among the peple is gyle
And al tho fayre vertues as vises thei semeth. (21.451-456)

In explaining the instinctual reaction of the brewer to the idea of abstract spiritual work, the *lewed vicory* reinforces the idea that Conscience and the concepts he represents are incomprehensible among ordinary people. The immediate effects of winning are all that is valued by them – to the extent that they have redefined the abstract ideas denoted by one of Conscience's own terms: prudence becomes the smartness that is able to deceive. They understand virtue itself as debased in comparison with what is so clearly good for them and

⁹⁰ Jenkins writes that he 'may only see the actual, but he sees that more clearly than some of the allegorical characters do' ('Frustration', p. 137).

have elevated their own achievements just as Conscience does his.⁹¹ Experience has altered these people's thinking into another allegory, a fact that signals that the particularity of lived experience cannot be funnelled easily into one preeminent conceptual system. There are several.

The *lewed vicory* expresses a vague approbation of Conscience, Grace, and warm praise of Piers, but he tempers these comments with a clear desire that they remain distant ideals rather than interfering presences among the people he understands so well. He advocates that Conscience remains in the 'kynges court' (21.424), and that Grace remain the guide of clerks (21.425). The *vicory* places Piers as an Emperor (21.427) – a characterisation he mentions alongside Piers's ploughs (21.426) to reinforce his desire that Piers guide from a position outside the realities of ordinary life.⁹² He compounds this when he makes his own reading of Piers's work of production – discussing the gifts God sends to the best and worst alike:

Rihte so Peres the plouhman payneth hym to tulie
 As wel for a wastour or for a wenche of the stuyves
 [...]
 So yblessed be Peres the plouhman that peyneth hym to tulie
 And trauaileth and tulieth for a tretour also sore
 As for a trewe tydy man, alle tymes ylyke.
 And worschiped be he that wrouthe all, bothe gode and wicke,
 And soffreth that synnefole be til som tyme that thei repente. (21.434-35,
 437-41)

⁹¹ The lord who speaks after the *vicory* abstracts his ruthless treatment of his reeve into an expression of the *Spiritus intellectus*. Langland suggests almost anything can be allegorised – in this case the lord understands his reeve to be sinful (because he is a reeve) and makes the punishment administered into a universal. The reeve probably does not appreciate the *Spiritus fortitudinis* with which money is collected from him, but the lord (like the labour laws) sees himself as in the right because he is enforcing an abstract principle.

⁹² C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 21.426 – these ploughs are the plough of the Half-Acre and this scene, the more material and the more abstract plough.

This is a vision of equality that the *vicory* blesses, but it is also quite inaccurate as a description of Piers's actions in the poem. 'Tonet of the stuyues' was among the first Piers threw out of his field (8.71), his wastours were kept on a leash of harsh hunger, and the outcast nature of prostitutes was reinforced only a few lines earlier when they were the first to fail to repent (21.367). The *vicory*'s understanding of the people is deeply antagonistic to Grace's allegory. Its indiscriminating distribution of grace outside of personal activity or position is a direct contradiction of Grace's organisation of the field according to profession and skill. It suggests a togetherness that undermines poetic tempo. This idea poses a problem for hermeneutics, as Peace points out: '[h]o couthe kyndeliche whit colour descreve | Yf all the world were whit or swan-whit alle thynges?' (20.213-14). Peace's words resonate in terms of representation. The alternation of bad and good gives meaning to the world. Identity creates predestinated concepts through which people can be organised and digested. Without this the blankness of nature reigns without question. The experience of the bad and the good that Peace is describing, moreover, caused the desire enshrined in the incarnation. Heaven may well be in a state of undefined bliss, this suggests, but while the world cannot mirror this perfection it must retain the representative capabilities that make it attractive to God by enshrining the perfect and defining evil in opposition to it.

The first rebuttal to the *vicory*'s image of a blessed equality is another wave of 'correcting' violence. Rather than benignly reflecting the differences between people and their sins, the custodians of the Barn want to organise them

into a pattern that will facilitate a rigid ideal. In this instance Kynde himself emerges as the leader of a vanguard tasked with making people's bodies their own enemies.⁹³ This strategy is clearly aimed at parsing natural embodiment as the site of a painful rejection of sin: a suffering in which hope can only be attached to salvation. In turning against the likes of the brewer and his use of the word, Kynde becomes involved in an overt act of self-definition that requires evidence. The natural world is doubly relevant to this project: it is Kynde's semantic field and it is the means through which the conceptual gains the appearance of true meaning. Kynde's violence takes the form of disease and ageing that turn people from the self-interested courses outlined by the *vicory*. They cease to think as their bodies enclose and ossify them into signs that support the image of the Barn's veracity. Kynde forces one meaning onto them (pain and death), effectively cancelling what else is *kynde* and good in the world – namely its reflection of the divine and of a forgiveness that encompasses sin and goodness alike.

Morton Bloomfield suggests that Need establishes temperance as a defining virtue in this scene – as the underpinning act of control that forms the basis for the perfect abstract order of the world.⁹⁴ As such, it is the building

⁹³ Hugh White explains how Kynde has clearly personified God in the poem before now because of 'a desire to see the natural as good', he argues that this identification undergoes challenges as the poem develops (p. 68). He asks '[h]ow can the appearances of Kynde's dispensation be reconciled with what must be the reality of his love?' (p. 60) White sees sin as having a 'positive purpose' in this attack of Kynde: 'Langland is, I think, optimistically insisting on the accommodatedness even of the fallen world of sin and suffering to the spiritual aspirations of man' (p. 60).

⁹⁴ Bloomfield, *Apocalypse*, pp. 135-43, 151: 'temperance in the broadest sense of the word is offered as the root of all virtue, of an ordered society, and of an ordered universe' (p. 140).

block of the allegory of forms and numbers that constituted monastic understanding of the perfect universe.⁹⁵ Through temperance the body is suppressed and can become the basis of ideas. Kynde enforces temperance through suffering. The logic of the attack is very like torture as Scarry describes it: the experiences of the body are limited as a result of violence and it becomes the basis of a different meaning.⁹⁶

Kynde comes 'oute of the planetes' (22.80), reflecting the cosmic order he has arrived to enforce, with a litany of ills.⁹⁷ The diversity and tempo of these lines asserts the fact that suffering leads to poetic beauty:

Kynde Conscience tho herde [...]
And sente forth his forreours, feueres and fluxes,
Cowhes and cardiacles, crampes and toeth-aches,
Reumes and radegoundes and roynouse scabbes,
Byles and boches and brennyng aguwes,
Freneseyes and foule eueles – forageres of Kynde
Hadde ypriked and preyede polles of peple;
Lergeliche a legioun lees the lyf sone. (22.80-87)

Langland is celebrating the diversity of terms available to him for the description of bodily diseases. He delineates not one but a series of suffering bodies – an even greater diversity of natural ills. The body in pain comes into sharp focus; physicality has arrived in the poem. There is a caveat, however, as

⁹⁵ 'One of the basic notions of metaphysical perfection was based upon the verse in Wisdom 11:21 [20], which stated that God created the world according to measure, number, and weight. In the Middle Ages these terms were widely used, though variously interpreted, to justify the conception of an ordered and perfect universe. [...] The limited is the knowable and the perfect. A perfect universe demands measure and limits – in the natural, social, and personal spheres' (Bloomfield, *Apocalypse*, p. 139).

⁹⁶ See Aers, *Imagination*, pp. 35-37: '[t]his is indeed a desperate position for a Catholic poet to reach' (p. 36).

⁹⁷ Bloomfield, *Apocalypse*, p. 144; Raabe, p. 16.

it is in a state of painful restraint. To be available to the scene's rigid allegorical order, these bodies must be dead.

The bodies on the opposite side of this battle are all in states of intense and clearly demarcated joy: Lecherie attacks 'with lauhyng chere' (22.114); Life laughs as he arms himself and seizes Fortune for a *lemman* (22.143-58) then escapes Elde to go to Revel 'a ryche place and a murye' (22.181). The opposite of the body in poetically useful pain is a joyful corporeality asserting the endless possibilities of meaning to be found in a nonchalant material world. Creating their own lineages – Fortune and Life beget Sloth – theirs is a self-perpetuating discourse with no apparent closure. Sloth catapults despair all around as any structure of work or thinking dissolves in his wake (22.163-64). The sense of what an opponent centred on a body with limitless meanings can achieve is both confusion on their own terms (they do not care) and the confusion encountered by opposing ways of understanding what the world means.

The structure of the perfect world Conscience is trying to assert faces a multiplying enemy characterised by the friars let into the Barn. Friars were popularly seen as a numberless swarm.⁹⁸ As a kind of preemptive assault on this frightening characteristic Conscience starts to lecture them before they have entered the Barn (which they apparently do not, apart from Friar Flatterer). He says that, if they want to be priests:

Kynde wol yow telle
That in mesure god made alle manere thynges

⁹⁸ C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 22.270. Pearsall notes the Wife of Bath's comments her Prologue: 3.866. Chaucer's Summoner recounts how all the friars in Hell live under the Devil's tail, and swarm out of it like bees (CT 3.1689-99). See Bloomfield, *Apocalypse*, p. 145.

And sette hit at a serteyne and at a syker nombre
 And nempned hem names and nombred the sterres:
Qui numerat multitudinem stellarum, &c.
 Kynges and knyhtes that kepen and defenden
 Haen officerys vnder hem and vch of hem a certeyne.
 And yf thei wage men to werre thei writen hem in nombre;
 [...]

Monkes and monyales and alle men of religioun,
 Here ordre and here reule wol to haue a certeyne nombre.
 [...]

ye wexeth out of nombre.
 Heuene haeth euene nombre and helle is withoute nombre;
 Forthy Y wolde witterly that ye were in registre
 And youre nombre vnder notarie sygne and nother mo ne lasse!
 (22.253-259, 264-65, 269-72)

Conscience is deeply aware of the confusion presented by the friars and compares it to the perfect order he sees in *nombre* elsewhere. He finds deep comfort in the notion of limits and registers – faced with the friars he can only see the ludicrous confusion they propose to the Barn and its society. They only make sense in Hell. In this instance they propose for Conscience a Hell of disorder. At once, they learn to propound a type of 'communism', teaching that 'alle thynges vnder heuene ouhte to be in comune' (22.276).⁹⁹ This scheme for distribution of goods refers back to the *vicory's* ideas of redemption and the aggressive claim of the wasters of the Half-Acre to Piers's food. It propounds a complete erosion of order. It is a complex and full attack on the premise of the Barn of Unity that prompts the narrator to intervene and condemn it. But, true to the poem's discovery that Conscience's and society's order requires violence to assert itself, it shows how that violence has to give way in the face of nature and the body's assertive variety.

⁹⁹ The word is Bloomfield's (*Apocalypse*, p. 145).

When the Barn falls it is precisely because the bodies within it cannot stand to be made the locus of the intense pain they are required to carry by its allegory. By the time Friar Flatterer gains his entry they are suffering under the dual agonies of sin and the proposed remedies that will bring them in line with goodness. Sin, recast in the Barn, has ceased to be the basis of happy ease that it was among the antagonistic forces of wrong. Now it is a wound. To counter this, more violent and energetic alliteration appears: 'Shrift schupte scharp salue and made men do penaunse' (22.306). The people resist these painful remedies and look for ease – one that 'softur couthe plastre' (22.310). This is no 'remedy' but a return to comfort for the body. As physical repose returns to the Barn, Conscience's rigid semantic requirements slip away. The Friar's supposed licentiousness indicates that familial boundaries are breaking down and disorganised multiplicity is arising in the guise of bastard children (22.346-47).¹⁰⁰ Contrition's well-known failure at this point indicates precisely how allegory cannot function without the violence that pushes the body into monolithic expression. Instead ease returns a differing interpretation of the natural and the confusion that follows bows to the blankness offered by physicality in the face of interpretation.

Finally pummelling the natural into accordance with the dictates of salvation history is an apposite closing gesture for the poem. And this episode uses the gesture of resolution as a way of showing how allegory needs to

¹⁰⁰ In a repeat of the knight's *kynde* courtesy in allowing Wastour to keep defying Piers, it is Hende-speche who lets the friar in (22.348).

violently force things to mean if it is to retain a formal semantic structure.

Allegory here is always on the brink of falling apart; this unravelling is counterpoised by organisational force. And the battle pushes the underlying tension in the form to the centre of its narrative. It is brave and shocking. More so because the will to organise according to good principles does not win. The poem concedes the antagonism of natural things to meaningful constructions – and so ends.

Elde

In Elde's attack on Will, the violence of his approaching age pushes him towards the Barn and the remedy proposed by Kynde – 'lerne to loue' (22.208) – that provides a profound answer to his quest in the poem. Old age is a prop for a descent into fear but also a more contemplative and wiser state for Will.

However, it achieves this as a pause, break, or even mistake.¹⁰¹ Elde makes Will bald by passing over his head while pursuing Life – 'So harde he yede ouer myn heued hit wol be sene euere!' (22.185) – and Will responds by indignantly asking: 'Sennes whanne was the way ouer mennes heuedes? | Haddest thou be

¹⁰¹ Ad Putter characterizes this as a mistake that wrecks the allegory: Elde changes from fighting Antichrist to fighting Will himself, who is collateral damage in a larger fight. I think this shows the violence of committed by those who want to support the Barn is dangerously indiscriminating, it ultimately wants to kill everything that is not already a dead sign of its own meaning. See Ad Putter, 'Personifications of Old Age in Medieval Poetry: Charles D'Orléans and William Langland', *Review of English Studies*, 63 (2011), 387-409 (p. 407).

hende [...] thow wost haue asked leue' (22.187-88).¹⁰² Will's self-righteous tone expresses a feeling we all have about our bodies in pain or illness: why didn't you ask *me* first?¹⁰³ This brings the themes of the battle up short. In Will's confusion and upset – the perspective of the individual in pain – it becomes clear that the meanings presented by the suffering body are diverse and confusing for the sufferer. From the perspective of living in a body, the attempts to police that body with violence appear ludicrous (as well as sinister).

Elde does not spare Will his blushes. He acts like an expert hit-man, peppering Will's body with small injuries while getting him where it hurts most:

[Elde] hitte me vnder the ere – vnnethe may iche here.
 He boffeded me aboute the mouthe and beet out my wang-teeth
 And gyued me in the gowtes – Y may nat go at large.
 And of the wo that Y was ynne my wyf hadde reuthe
 And wesched wel witterly that Y were in heuene.
 For the lyme that she loued me fore and leef was to fele
 A nyhtes, nameliche, when we naked were,
 Y ne myhte in none manere maken hit at here wille,
 So Elde and [s]he hit hadde forbete. (22.190-98)

In the attack we learn of detailed injuries; little sites of pain emerge as Will's experience in his new 'old' body is fragmented into tender sensations. The pain

¹⁰² Daniel Pigg points out the comedy of this question; Daniel F. Pigg, 'Old Age, Narrative Form, and Epistemology in Langland's *Piers Plowman*: The Possibility of Learning', in *Old Age in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, ed. by Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), pp. 393-405 (pp. 400-1). See *MED*, 'yede' v., 9c. The use of 'yede' here mixes its associations with walking or travelling with its use to mean 'come upon' in relation to old age or fear. The *MED* gives this example from the Wycliffite Bible, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl. 959, line 1527: 'Helde gede on ysaac, Wurðede sighteles and elde swac'.

¹⁰³ As Ad Putter points out, Will has had plenty of warning that this moment was to come (11.186-92; 12.1; 12.12). His surprise is made more humorous by this. See Putter 'Personifications', 404.

creates his experience of the world: he cannot go out because of his aching guts, his wife wishes he were dead because of his failed sexual performances. These twinges and their consequences convey the experience of a lived-in body. And the whole frame of the attack shows how unexpected and unwanted these changes are. Will's shock is figured in amusingly social terms that show him as an individual in despair and not a figure in a system of signs.

The sexual undercurrents in the story of Will's impotence – that his penis has been beaten by Elde and Kit – have been noted.¹⁰⁴ Will's emasculation through impotence makes him resemble the feminine blank matter onto which allegorical significance enforces form in Teskey's formulation of Aristotle. But in this retelling of that process an abstract meaning is not imprinted on Will's body. Rather, he becomes the pathetic recipient of his wife's hatred. In a story conveying the strength of a woman's sexual desire for her husband, masculine embodiment accrues a new and unexpected meaning in the poem – the source of licit feminine pleasure.¹⁰⁵ Elde transforms Will's body into an aged one, but in doing so he releases the plethora of discourses it is possible to attach to the natural, rather than the single idea he was supposed to imprint on the world with his violence.¹⁰⁶

In his style of personification itself, Elde is an open signal of how

¹⁰⁴ See James J. Paxson, 'Inventing'.

¹⁰⁵ See Tavormina, pp. 179, 192-95, 210.

¹⁰⁶ Putter notes how the word play of this attack means spiritual ideals are consistently undercut by more worldly (and humorous) concerns: his wife's *reuthe* is for herself faced with his impotence; she seems to want him in heaven, but actually wishes him dead ('Personifications', pp. 407-8).

orthodox personifications' bodies are constrained and controlled into meaning. As the fulcrum of an agedness that emanates from him, Elde is not discernibly an old man, he is the source of what is old.¹⁰⁷ His means of spreading meaning reflects how varied old age is among different bodies.¹⁰⁸ In other medieval texts that deal with age, ways of signifying the 'old' include characterisation, complex allegory, or appearance.¹⁰⁹ Each displays age as a series of accepted signifiers: 'Croked and courbede, encrampeschett for edle; | Alle disfygured was his face and fadit his hewe, | His berde and browes were blanchede full whitte'.¹¹⁰

Elde's violence opens the process of personification to scrutiny, showing that to

¹⁰⁷ Deeth in Chaucer's 'The Pardoner's Tale' addresses precisely the discrepancy between personifying through looks and through active principles. The Old Man, who is not described but whose age is frequently alluded to, signifies visually while the narrative of the florins is the process via which death is enacted. Deth appears in *Piers* in Passus 20, but is secondary to Elde.

¹⁰⁸ Elde avoids a problem Teskey describes as revealing the nonsensical way most personifications express concepts: that they are predicated on themselves, i.e. 'Justice is just'. The problem is that of the 'Third Man', first explored by Plato in his dialogue *Parmenides*: 'This argument [...] purports to show that the theory of forms involves an infinite regression. The form Man is connected to a particular man by the two sharing something that is separate from each. This thing can be nothing other than a Third Man, which must in turn share something with the first two, and so on.' The introduction of a woman as the propagating other removes this issue. The idea of fleshy matter waiting to be imprinted with a form is a convenient way of imagining the arrival of a concept in a body as it is just forced onto a space where nothing was previously, Teskey (p. 14).

¹⁰⁹ Characterisation: in Chaucer's 'The Merchant's Tale', January takes aphrodisiacs (CT 4.1810) repulses his stonily passive wife (CT 4.1818, 1854) with his scratchy beard (CT 4.1825-26), wobbly chin (CT 4.1849), and patronising talk (CT 4.1835-37). His name and May's, of course, reflect the seasons of a person's life. See Harry Peters, 'Jupiter and Saturn: Medieval Ideas of 'Elde', in *Old Age*, ed. by Classen, pp. 375-391 (pp. 376-380). Chaucer's Wife of Bath characterizes such a one as 'bacon' (CT 3.418) in her prologue; January in his turn calls older women 'old boef', or 'bene-straw and grete forage' (CT 4.1420, 22) – saying an older woman is no longer pliable (CT 4.1430). Before her transformation the Hag in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' forces her young Knight through a joyless marriage. Older people in *The Canterbury Tales* are pitifully desirous but physically repellant. Complex allegory: Charles D'Orléans faces his age in poetry replete with objects with numerous unlikely significations. Putter 'Personification', 407. Appearance: Old Age depicted on the wall of the garden in the *Rose* is shrivelled and tiny, wrinkled, white-haired and ugly, ll. 339-357. The Old Woman is similarly aged, as is the hag in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale'.

¹¹⁰ *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, ll. 154-56, see *Wynnere*, ed. by Ginsberg, p. 47. See Bloomfield, 'Allegory', 165.

make a body display an abstract meaning requires a violent effort aimed at reducing the experience of that body into one of singular suffering. In line with this, numerous medieval theories of ageing variously saw it as a stage of intense wisdom, sexual voraciousness (in spite of impotence), childishness, or – in the case of women – trickery, foulness, and evil.¹¹¹ Such readings of old age were constraining and, potentially, damaging. Elde is more of a force engineering diverse age – however much he is part of a controlling army.

As he has elsewhere in the poem, Langland opens his allegorical techniques to scrutiny here and we see how violence constrains the body's self-expression in normative allegory. Elde's encounter with Will opens him to a confusing and full experience of embodiment with no obvious abstract corollary – he may become old, but no obvious conceptual development follows his body into age.¹¹² The answer he is given by Kynde when he asks how he can alleviate his suffering – 'lerne to loue' – is similarly open-ended, experiential, and material. The idea of affective learning (laying aside the use of the rod) is not one connected to systems of imposed meaning. It is an answer that, as David Aers argues, sees Will remain within the church while accepting its numerous worldly limitations.¹¹³ This is a compromised and damaged space – one that

¹¹¹ See Pigg, 'Old Age'; Putter, 'Personifications', 405, n. 37; Gretchen Miezowski, 'Old Age and Medieval Misogyny: The Old Woman', in *Old Age*, ed. by Classen, pp. 299-319; Karen Pratt, 'De vetula: the Figure of the Old Woman in Old French Literature', in *Old Age*, pp. 321-42; Shulamith Shahar, 'The old body in medieval culture', in *Framing*, eds. Kay and Rubin, pp. 160-86.

¹¹² Unlike those on Piers's field, he is not constrained by so desperate an allegory – he roams into Unity but the strict allegory there is soon to fall apart to reveal a compromised and varied site.

¹¹³ Aers, 'Visionary Eschatology', 13.

cannot be encompassed or described by perfect order. It is, however, the space remaining, and Will must wait within it: understanding its imperfections and learning to love. Outside of the ideal structures that only have limited use for Will, learning to love will be a difficult and complex process better pursued away from a textuality that constrains. As he finds this answer, he lays it aside.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined how words in allegory can work on bodies without any sensitivity to the experience of that body or understanding of how that body may change the meaning of the word. Such assertive impressions of meaning on the physical are imagined by Langland through moments of extreme allegorical violence in which the body becomes an enclosed space for the sufferer – a place where the physical is paramount but which allows no room for expression and exploration of matter. In allegories where complex structures of meaning are pasted onto bodies, this violence occurs within the form and is invisible. Because Langland's allegory depicts a mediation between the physical and the semantic some of its most striking images display the moment at which allegorical schemes force meanings on bodies. This, in turn, mimics a politics Langland condemns through his imaginative engagement with the suffering body. Violence arises in texts because of the desire to reveal the natural, which emerges as the imposition of discourse on something both heterogeneous and indifferent to meaning. At the moment where he seeks to

articulate most fully the thing he loves, Langland commits a tragic violence against it. As a result, however, he achieves densely beautiful poetic expression that figures matter as a fugitive to monolithic meanings. Bodies are places in *Piers* on which words can achieve intense varieties of meaning if only they do not approach with that meaning already decided.

Chapter Four

'thien hoend thow hem shewe': The Sensuality of Metaphor

Having examined how the natural evades Langland's grasp and how the body slips away from categories of meaning imposed on it by the poem, in this final chapter I will propose that the body can and does have a profound presence in Langland's poem by developing a fully articulated hermeneutics of flesh. I close this thesis by mounting the argument that the physical basis of allegory is the body of the reader, which is appealed to consistently throughout *Piers Plowman* as a material referent for the ideas it expresses.

In making this argument I am building on a body of recent work that has brought pleasure, affect, and emotion into the interpretation of medieval works.¹ Much of this work asserts that anxiety has surrounded its reception by medievalists working in a field that has privileged the dry, rigorous, and unemotional. These new interventions make reference to a previous era of study in which inference, conjecture, and personality were rife: from which the disciplines surrounding study of medieval texts and history has sought to

¹ See Nicholas Watson, 'Desire for the Past' in *Maistresse of my Wit*, ed. by Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 149-88, for an early contribution to the field where he attacks Kathleen Biddick's critique of Bynum's *Feast* as 'an apophatic forgetting of the meaning we once ascribed to the past' (p. 160) that personally affects him as a medievalist. Biddick attacks Bynum's grammatical elision of the reader, writer and mystic in her book *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), as this deliberately suppresses aspects of past experience we may not want to be associated with (pp. 135-62), namely, accusations of blood-libel, which Biddick sees as an insistent backdrop to the context of Bynum's work. Biddick's prose is punishing, but she is also aware of the importance of affect in historical study and uses it in numerous places for example she prints an archive of a letter written by Tom Topasch, Vice chairman of the Potawatomi Indian Nation (Pokason Band), in which he describes the long effect of the settlement of America on his people in stark and affecting terms (p. 183).

distance itself.² This new field manages such distance through a deep self-consciousness concerning the mediation of medieval texts and objects by their modes of transmission.³ Simultaneously, it foregrounds the ability of medieval texts and objects to elicit a physical response and give the impression of an experience occurring outside the dichotomies established by historical scholarship: then / now, us / them.⁴ Catherine Brown writes that the past has claims upon us '[a]nd those claims call us [...] to remember that thought is material and sensuous before it can be abstract, to learn to live in the middle, between familiar categories of past and present, subject and object, 'self' and 'other'.⁵ In work that seeks to draw on personal affect as a basis for interpretation, the bodily experiences of the reader are foregrounded. This occasionally happens at the expense of the text, as when Carolyn Steedman describes her experiences with 'archive fever' chasing her from her research in a state of semi-delirium. The physical experience of the text in this instance is with the imagined bodies of the dead who have shed skin in the books of the

² See Sarah McNamer 'Feeling' in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. by Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 241-57, where she talks about the masculinity of the field and the fear that enquiries into emotion will make those in literary studies look like 'disciplinary softies' (p. 244); Stephanie Trigg's discussion of E. Talbot Donaldson in 'Langland's Tears: Poetry, Emotion, and Mouvanse', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 26 (2012), 27-48. For the complex relationship between the colonially-inflected founding of medieval studies and its later proponents; Kathleen Biddick, *Shock*, pp. 1-104; Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Readers and the Queerness of Time* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 37-38 for a discussion of 'nonprofessionals and dilettantes' as central to the discipline of medieval studies (p. xv).

³ See Bruce Holsinger, 'Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal,' *PMLA*, 124 (2009), 616-623; and Sarah Kay 'Original Skin'.

⁴ See Catherine Brown, 'In the Middle' *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 30 (2000), 547-574.

⁵ Brown, 'Middle', 567.

archive: 'it was their dust that I breathed in' (says the researcher in her small-hours panic).⁶ Rosemond Tuve writes of 'the pleasure we take in recognizing the truth of something experience confirms' as 'native to allegorical reading' and it is this pleasure I explore in this chapter: the physical knowledge that allegory encourages us to bring to a text in order to understand.⁷ This is a way of touching the past and collapsing time not just through pleasure, but through bringing one's own body into the interpretation of allegory and seeing it interact with a medieval text.

My understanding of the importance of our bodies and the resonances they can feel with texts and distant parts of history has been shaped by metaphor theory, which argues that concepts related to human cognition (e.g. reason and truth) are structured by the mechanisms that exist in our bodies and that the 'peculiarities' of being human govern human thought, rather than

⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 19. Steedman uncovers a series of medical papers from between 1820 and 1850 that considered scholarship to contain various occupational hazards arising from its sedentary nature, and its arduous effects on the brain. Other notable instances include Foucault's discussion of the stirring of his 'fibres' by the reported 'rascality' of those whose lives he examines in a way that takes his response outside of his usual reaction to 'what is ordinarily called 'literature' ('Lives of Infamous Men', *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 157-175. p. 158); Walter Benjamin's consideration of 'the good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart' ('Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1990), pp. 245-255); Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero's discussion of the 'pleasure' as a reliable principle for allowing new, queer histories to be written (*Premodern Sexualities*, ed. by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. vi-xxii); Carolyn Dinshaw's revolutionary work on queer histories has enabled the concept that we can physically touch people in the past across the boundaries of textuality (*Getting Medieval*), and recent work in which she ceases to think of temporality as 'a mechanistic and constricting linearity that leads bleakly, infinitely onward' and instead sees it as 'full of attachments and desires, histories and futures', her present is asynchronous a place where 'different time frames or temporal systems [collide] in a single moment of now' (*How Soon is Now?* pp. 3, 5).

⁷ Tuve, *Imagery*, p. 162. Davlin also touches on this pleasure when she describes the reader's necessary participation Langland's punning allegory – a form of play through which the text becomes an experience centred on shared feeling with Will, *Game*, pp. 2-3, 118, 121.

philosophical entities imagined as being in the world.⁸ These ideas are based on an understanding of human cognition as built entirely on bodily experiences that I think Langland would have fully appreciated.⁹ Having discussed the body as a fugitive to expression in Chapter 3, I will to end on a more hopeful note by examining how human ways of understanding the world through the body are used in Langland's poetics and can be used in interpretation of his poem. I use metaphor theory to explain aspects of Langland's embodied imagination. Langland uses allegory in a way that relies profoundly on how the body affects our understanding of words and ideas. In doing so, he appeals to his readers' understanding of bodies (their shared embodiment) as one layer in the process of reading his allegory. So, the poor man with a hangover naturally appeals to our experiences of the morning after to give us a full expression of what 'pouerte' means to Langland. The body is therefore a key tool in

⁸ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 4. See also pp. 21-22. They write: 'We have inherited from the Western philosophical tradition a theory of faculty psychology, in which we have a 'faculty' of reason that is separate from and independent of what we do with our bodies. In particular, reason is seen as independent of perception and bodily movement. In the Western tradition, this autonomous capacity of reason is regarded as what makes us essentially human, distinguishing us from all other animals. If reason were not autonomous, that is, not independent of perception, motion, emotion, and other bodily capacities, then the philosophical demarcation between us and all other animals would be less clearly drawn' (pp. 16-17). Representation of Reason as an embodied entity of its own strongly express the ideas presented in this tradition; Langland depicts Reason as following animals more than it does humans, though, of course, this is a rebuke to humans – with whom it clearly should be associated.

⁹ To accept this, we have to accept Lakoff and Johnson's statement that 'communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting' (p. 3). Similarly, we must accept that 'the process of human cognition is independent of language' and that there are 'deeper cognitive processes involved in cognition that language expresses', Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 21. These insights arise from cognitive science, which argues that roughly 95 percent of thought occurs in a 'cognitive unconscious': a (non-Freudian) realm of thought invisible to us that shapes thoughts of abstract concepts as a 'hidden hand' based in the physical (pp.10-14).

interpretation of *Piers*. Bringing the body into the text to understand its words and figures, Langland shows a deep sensitivity to the material world that I will examine in relation to theories that see thought as embodied. Sharing thought based on embodiment is a profound way for medieval and modern readers to experience thinking and reading in similar ways. Such an affective, embodied relationship with the texts we study can be difficult to admit, let alone discuss. In what follows, I hope to establish a critical framework for an embodied reading of *Piers*.

The importance of bodily experience is the governing principle of one of the poem's most famous similes, in which the Samaritan expounds the nature of the Trinity. Abraham (Faith) has provided excessively personal explanations of this concept – 'In a somur Y hym seyh [...] as Y saet in my porche, | Where god cam gangynge a thre riht by my gate' (18.240-41)¹⁰ – or very difficult ones: '[t]hre persones parselmele departable fram othere | And alle thre but o god' (19.30-31). *Spes*'s injunction that Will believe 'in o lord that lyueth in thre persones' (19.44) thus falls on deaf ears: 'Go thy gate' (19.46).¹¹ God's oneness and threeness have seemed to shift and change without context: 'Y roos vp and reuerensd god and riht fayre hym grette, | Wosch here feet and wyped hem

¹⁰ Will repeats this phrasing in his question to the Samaritan (he uses it in the first instance when he is questioning *Spes*): 'shal nat we bileue, | As Faith and his felawe *Spes* enfourmede me bothe, | In thre persones a parces departable fram othere | And alle thre bote o god?' (19.96-98). Abraham's beautiful but entirely unglossed memory of meeting the trinity has a strong effect on Will. The memory refers to Genesis 18:1-15.

¹¹ C text, ed. Pearsall, note to 112. For a discussion of the originality of the image, see Frederick M. Biggs, "For God is After an Hand": *Piers Plowman* B.1738-205', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 5 (1991), 17-30. A possible source is Isaiah 40:12, where the fist and palm are identified with creation (p. 26).

and afturward they eten' (18.242-43). In contrast to this loose and personal history, with its dizzying anecdotal slippage, the Samaritan takes his listener back to basics. He gives him a way of understanding the Trinity that he can always rely on. If one wants to argue that the Trinity exists, the Samaritan says, just show your hand:

And yf Kynde Wit carpe here-ayen or eny kyne thouhtes
 Or eretikes with argumentis, thien hoend thow hem shewe.
 For god that al bygan in the bigynnyng of the worlde
 Ferde furste as a fuste, and yut is, as Y leue,
Mundum pugillo continens,
 As a fuste with a fynger yfolde togyderes
 Til hym likede and luste to vnlose that finger
 And profered hit forth as with the paume to what place hit sholde.
 The paume is the pethe of the hand and profereth forth the fyngeres
 To ministre and to make that myhte of hand knoweth
 And bitokeneth trewly, telle ho-so liketh,
 The holy goest of heuene: he is as the paume.
 The fyngres that fre ben to folde and to cluche
 Bitokneth soethly the sone that sente was til erthe. (19.111-23)

Using the body as a basis for a simile is unsurprising in the context of a poem that subjects bodies to such sustained and exploratory looks. The Samaritan, like Imaginatif, is a master of metaphor. He takes the dreamer carefully through the meaning of his comparison, making it clear how each part of the hand can be associated with each part of the Trinity, and moving on to explore his particular concern, sins against the Holy Ghost (14.166*a*, Mark 3:29).¹² Having told the dreamer to use his hand in argument, he then discusses a hypothetical hand:

Ac ho is herte in the hand euene in the myddes
 He may resceyue riht nauhte, resoun hit sheweth;

¹² See Hewett-Smith, 'Nede', p.238-39; Frank, 'Art', 240.

For the fyngeres that folde sholde and the fust make
 For peyne of the paume power hem fayleth
 To cluche or to clawe, to clippe or to holde. (19.153-57)

before moving onto to his own:

Were the myddel of myn hand ymaymed or ypersed
 Y sholde receyue ryht nouht of that Y reche myhte. (19.158-59)

He thus makes the reader unavoidably aware of the universally referential basis of this simile. The clincher of the reader's awareness of this meaning appears when the Samaritan starts talking of the *pethe* of the hand being *ymaymed* or *ypersed* and so losing its ability to 'resceyue', to 'cluche or to clawe, to clippe or to holde' and talks about how it could sustain other gruesome injuries and still function:

Ac thouh my thombe and my fyngeres bothe were toshullen
 And the myddel of myn hand withoute mal-ese
 In many kyne manere Y myhte mysulfe helpe,
 Bothe meue and amende, thogh alle myn fyngeres oke.
 Bi this *simile*, he saide, 'Y se an euydence
 That ho-so synegeth in the seynt spirit assoiled worth he neuere.
 (19.160-165)

In referring to the pain of injury, speculating about his own hurt hand, and by extension Will's and a hypothetical hand, the Samaritan makes his reader aware of another hand that is relevant to this argument: her own. In alluding to the pain of a hand pierced through the palm, no reader can avoid a sudden flinching awareness of her hand's vulnerability – it is too immediately obvious that the palm is a sensitive site and that, however she might help herself if her fingers *oke* after they had been *toshullen*, she would lose the ability to move her fingers or to ball her hand into a fist if she were stabbed in the palm. Therefore,

it is through having hands that we understand this simile and so, by extension, the Samaritan makes having hands how we understand the Trinity. After the full explanation of the meaning of this simile, the Samaritan moves to another that compares the Trinity to a candle made up of wax, wick, and flame. But, though this second comparison appeals to our experience with candles and our sympathy for 'werkmen | That worchen and waken in wynteres nyhtes' (19.187-88), and goes on to develop ideas of the body as a physical candle lit by the spirit (see Chapter 1) it does not have the physical, sensual immediacy of the image of the Samaritan's hand. This kind of experiential metaphor exemplifies the series of direct and compelling physical appeals to the reader that recur throughout *Piers Plowman*.

Langland uses the Samaritan's simile of the hand to think through an abstruse issue. This is a strategy that readers share and it is one that, according to metaphor theory, indicates shared human motions of thought and experience outside textuality. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, pioneers of this theory, we think in metaphor. This does not just mean we think intellectually through the lens of the metaphorical, but that 'the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day' is governed by metaphor.¹³ Difficult abstract concepts (such as the Trinity), according to this theory, are worked through in the mind according to the comfortable and obvious facts related to our experience of having bodies (the movement of a hand), of

¹³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 3.

touching and observing material things, and of moving and being in spaces.¹⁴

These metaphors relate to how we seek to understand things, but they are also a sign that our understanding has no referent but the physical, so this theory works on and reinforces the conclusion that all modes of cognition are deeply embodied and that ideas of intelligence and reason are indelibly linked to the corporeal and experiential:

The same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around also create our conceptual systems and modes of reason [...]. [Reason] is shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies, by the remarkable details of the neural structure of our brains, and by specifics of our everyday functioning in the world.¹⁵

Such peculiarities and specifics are shared across cultural and temporal divides, meaning that 'much of a person's conceptual system is either universal or widespread across languages and cultures'.¹⁶ So when we read details of concepts held in different times and places, while 'we have no access to the inner lives of those in radically different cultures, we do have access to their metaphor systems and the way they reason using those metaphor systems', and the basis of this reasoning is a shared embodiment.¹⁷ Understanding mechanisms of reason and thought that arise from embodied structures and

¹⁴ Slingerland writes 'Our primary and most highly structured experience is with the physical realm, and the patterns that we encounter and develop through the interaction of our bodies with the physical environment therefore serve as our most basic source domains. These source domains are then called upon to provide structure when our attention turns to the abstract realm'; here, 'source domains' means 'a more concrete or clearly organized domain' that can be used to 'talk about another, usually more abstract or less clearly structured' one (p.21).

¹⁵ Lakoff and Johnson, *Flesh*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Flesh*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Lakoff and Johnson, *Flesh*, p. 284.

metaphors allows us to appreciate how our modes of thinking overlap with those of the past. We can see how past peoples used the facts of physical experience we undoubtedly share with them to reach conclusions of thought either like our own or radically different.¹⁸ And this allows us, in some way, to touch on medieval people's ways of understanding and experiencing.¹⁹

Metaphorical thought is our way of articulating complex cognitive processes that we enact but that we do not consciously experience, such as seeing, being, reading, or loving. In one metaphorical illustration of this theory, Lakoff and Johnson discuss how metaphor has been used to contain and convey ideas surrounding the transferral of meaning in language. They discuss the 'conduit metaphor', a way of speaking about language that sees linguistic expressions as containers for ideas imagined as objects, and communication as a way of sending the one within the other. Thus we might say: 'It's hard to get that idea across to him', 'When you have a good idea, try to capture it immediately in words'.²⁰ Here metaphors grounded on embodied, active,

¹⁸ See C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press), pp. 1-4, where he discusses the delicate intersections between 'biological universals' and 'cultural attitudes' in the study of the medieval senses (p. 2). He is looking at the latter, rather than the former and argues that, in looking at medieval sensuality: 'we should expect from the senses a range of behavioural responses and uses significantly different to our own' (p.2), but this proceeds on the same basis that I rely on here, that '*prima facie*, there was probably almost complete symmetry between their physical sensations and ours' (pp. 1-2). Being stabbed in the hand (and imagining being so) must have produced a comparable series of sensations, then and now.

¹⁹ See Y. Hamilakis 'The past as oral history: towards an archaeology of the senses' in *Thinking through the Body: Archaeologies of Corporeality*, ed. by Y Hamilakis, M. Pluciennik and S. Tarlow (New York: Springer, 2002), pp. 121-36. He writes: '[w]e exist in and attend to the world through our senses, our bodily encounters with the world. Individuals are not abstract social actors, de-personalised, disembodied agents, but embodied realities, incorporated and incorporating social relationships' (p. 122).

²⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, pp. 10-14.

spatial experiences replace the abstract experience of using words. Allegory is fundamentally understood through conduit metaphors as the term 'vehicle' (used by Mann among others) and Teskey's term 'capture' both makes clear. Allegory can be best understood as a way of placing one idea in the vessel of another or of seizing a physical basis through which to explain abstract words. Therefore at the heart of the form is a concept of one material carrying another that itself arises from a human need to understand reading through physical gestures. This kind of embodied thinking is fundamental to Langland as his physical allegory describes a body grasped by words and grappling with their presence. He sees humans as active bodies negotiating a world of language through touch.

Langland makes explicit in his form a hermeneutics of flesh that surrounds multiple metaphoric expressions of reading: medieval and modern. In Chapter 2 I explore metaphors of reading and look at medieval figures in which the text is a cloth covering the body of meaning beneath it.²¹ The metaphor of 'surface reading' does the same. In this reading ideas of the text as a covering are replaced by ideas of the text as a decorated cloth – another spatially understood figure – so a reader can imagine herself looking at a surface instead of lifting it away. These phrases bear no relation to the physical act of reading, but without them an expression of its processes feels near-

²¹ In scholarship on this issue precisely the metaphorical/cognitive aspect of these formulations is accepted without analysis of how our experience in our bodies can be used to relate to and debunk such ideas. See Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, p. 14, where she lists different metaphors for reading and writing. Her framework for analysis is Lacanian and she does not discuss metaphor theory.

impossible. In his 'Lives of Infamous Men', a text in which he is describing how physically close he feels to the subjects whose stories he is reading, Foucault uses a kaleidoscope of metaphorical images to discuss how its subjects enter the text he is reading. They are 'draped' in words; they have 'lives whose disarray and relentless energy one senses beneath the stone-smooth words'; the writers of these lives are 'stir[ring] in words that [are] awkward and violent'; thus creating an odd register that brings 'tramps, poor wretches, or simply mediocre individuals onto a strange stage where they strike poses, speechify and declaim, where they drape themselves in the bits of cloth they need if they wish to draw attention to themselves in the theatre of power'.²² The lives have a 'purely verbal existence' that has no reality 'outside the precarious domicile of these words' that sees them clothed in 'gaudy' rags.²³ This subject is difficult and baffling (how do these individuals relate to the texts we find them in?) but Foucault's beautiful phrasing expresses reading and writing through a series of intensely involved metaphors: clothes, homes, theatres, cooking, rocks. As a result Foucault's reader has a vividly clear picture of the text Foucault is reading. Metaphor here uses her experience of physicality and her body to explain something highly conceptual. A corollary is that the reader feels something of Foucault's humanity as he is feeling something of these people's.²⁴ She shares with him the physical experience of all these things (stones,

²² Foucault, pp. 158, 171.

²³ Foucault, p. 162.

²⁴ See Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp. 136-40. Dinshaw discusses the pleasurable feeling a reader may have of sharing Foucault's reading, but does not touch on these metaphors of reading.

domiciles, stages, bits of cloth) and so she can travel with him down the paths of meaning he indicates. Time, here, is collapsed by an imagination that places each participant in the text (the reader now, Foucault, the text's subjects) in moments of expression that bear direct relation to their bodies.

Ideas of reading like these have numerous analogues in medieval formulations of difficult concepts. Some of these remain in language largely unchanged; others have altered over time, but their existing relationship with physical gesture means they are accessible to our understanding. So, where metaphors of reading as eating are still used ('a voracious reader'; 'a digested read') while there is no expectation that readers will lick texts, eat apples with words etched on the skin, or imagine textually-informed speech as a type of gluttonous folly leading to sickness.²⁵ But these acts are curiously resonant as an extension of modern ways of understanding and acts of consumption. When Catherine Brown discusses the potential for affect in medieval studies her most persuasive strategy is to express ideas of the porousness between modernity and the past in metaphors of eating-as-reading. Brown writes that the past asks us to 'chew words well before we swallow', when imagining the role of a scribe in the composition of a manuscript, she writes that: 'the text doesn't just pass through the scribe, use his or her hand as an instrument; it's changed by its

²⁵ See Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'The Apple's Message: Some Post-Conquest Hagiographic Accounts of Textual Transmission', in *Late Medieval Religious Texts and Their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A. I. Doyle*, ed. by A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), pp. 39-53, where she explains how books were seen as more materially powerful in a less literate time, citing examples of an amulet filled with text of the Life of St Margaret that was used to protect a pregnant women (pp. 47-49). And *Piers* 11.38-39; 15.95-96; 16.219-21. Eating in the poem has numerous other metaphoric applications. Such as priests who 'chewen here charite and chiden aftur more' (1.190). See Mann, 'Eating and Drinking'.

passage, like food through a body',²⁶ She glosses St Jerome, saying '[w]ords are gas, text is food',²⁷ and she understands the arrival of the past in the body through study as a deeply physical experience: '[t]he text resists; you take it into you, but it is not 'you'; you break it open, suck it, chew it; you change it, and it will change you, so that, ultimately, you and it, subject and object, then and now, are not easily distinguishable'.²⁸ When used to aid understanding of acts of reading this series of corporeal terms places modern readers in the same position as medieval readers who consumed such metaphoric descriptions.²⁹ Having bodies that eat leads to understanding of how medieval people read. In allegories, such metaphors animate the text itself as not only reading but entire spectrums of abstract thought become richly embodied. Langland exploits this to the full, showing how ideas cannot be understood except as they are passed through a deeply resonant embodied experience.

²⁶ Brown, 'Middle', p. 562.

²⁷ Brown is herself glossing St. Jerome's gloss on Psalm 44's 'My heart belched forth a good word' in which he writes: 'as the belch breaks from the stomach according to the quality of the food, which is indicated by the good or foul smell of the wind, so the cogitations of the inner man are brought forth in words [...] [t]he just man, eating, fills his soul, and when he is replete with sacred teaching, he offers good things from the treasure-house of his good heart' (Brown, p. 560, citing and translating Jerome, Letter 65 'To Principia', *PL* 22: 377).

²⁸ Brown, 'Middle', p. 561.

²⁹ 'The soul that is sincere and wise will not fail to chew the psalm with the teeth as it were of the mind, because if he swallows it in a lump, without proper mastication, the palate will be cheated of the delicious flavours, sweeter even than honey that drips from the comb' (Brown p. 561, citing Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Cantorum* 7.4.5, English from *On the Song of Songs*, vol. 1, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 41-42).

Journeys

In *Piers Plowman*, journeys and states of movement repeatedly represent change and its causation. In this vein, the dreamer is fetched away by Fortune 'into the lond of longyng' (11.167), and Recklessness, fearful of predestination, thinks about those 'pult out of grace' (11.206); Imaginatif thinks about philosophers who have not been 'brouhte by here bokes to blisse ne to ioye' (14.78) and calls the dreamer 'the that sekest aftur the whyes' (14.156).³⁰ Such movements, whether self-propelled or involuntary, predominate in a poem situated in the landscape of thought. Lakoff and Johnson describe in their work how the simplest acts of movement form complex networks of articulation for abstract states of change and their causes.³¹ And Langland's allegory mobilises these casual expressions to imagine a series of actors constantly moving across a landscape littered with concrete representations of abstract states. This landscape reveals and revels in the metaphorical aspects of everyday expressions and thought. It shows how ideas that cannot move are consistently understood as active or passive, energetic or sluggish, peaceful or violent; as acted by, or on our bodies. In this way the poem as a whole enables its readers

³⁰ In one more example, the dreamer is drawn 'forth' by Fauntelete (Recklessness) after his speech (11.309) into wild behaviour.

³¹ Lakoff and Johnson, in *Philosophy in the Flesh*, describe the particularly embodied nature of journeys and thinking about them: '[w]e have a visual system, with topographic maps and orientation-sensitive cells, that provides structure for our ability to conceptualize spatial relations. Our abilities to move in the ways we do and track the motion of other things give motion a major role in our conceptual system. The fact that we have muscles and use them to apply force in certain ways leads to the structure of our system of causal concepts. What is important is that the peculiar nature of our bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualization and categorization' (p. 19).

to see clearly how imagined movement expresses experiences of thoughts as moving. Ideas are housed in kinetic bodies that progress across the page. Langland dramatizes this as people representing states of mind, words, and curiosity progressing energetically through a text that seeks abstract conclusions. Moving bodies lead the reader through understanding in a way that interpolates her body to become the basis of her understanding of the text. It is the key to movement in a poem that sees moving as seeking understanding, as striving achieving a realisation based on its perception of the material.

The way humans explain the abstract is grounded in the way bodies act. The neural structures used to accomplish any basic bodily activity have the same structures ascribed to things that happen in the world.³² Lakoff and Johnson argue that events and causes are conceptualized by us metaphorically rather than being literal realities or 'objective features of the world [...] part of the basic ontology of what exists'.³³ And so, as a way of explaining apparently random alterations in the state of things around us, people look to their own bodies and describe events, changes, and causes as occurring in patterns

³² See Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy*, pp. 41-42, pp. 175-76. See also pp. 30-36, where they discuss the ways our descriptions of spatial relations in various forms arise from unconscious mental activity. So, we place butterflies *in* a garden, or allocate fronts to buildings according to where we are, and visible lines to trajectories. These ways of seeing (such as containers) are physically instantiated, but have structures that are applied to non-psychical things.

³³ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy*, p. 171.

understood through embodied experience.³⁴ Thus, changes between fixed states – which are imagined as containers or bounded spaces – are generally seen as effected by volitional agency and force which causes movement: people are thrust *out of* grace; pulled *into* Fortune; bought *to* Bliss.³⁵ Lakoff and Johnson argue that because '[w]e have an enormously rich knowledge about motion in space that comes from our own movements and from the movements of others that we perceive' people use movement as a map with which to understand how changes occur.³⁶ Change, therefore, is conceptualized as movement from one place (or thing) to another. And long term change is, naturally, imagined as a journey – with all the attendant frustrations, joys, exhaustions, and arrivals that a journey entails. It is easy to see, in this context, how the desire to comprehend a series of complex ideas might be seen as seeking after the whys.

The structure of journeys as physical processes with meanings inherent in their unfolding is recognisable across numerous medieval texts. On reading *Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, new readers are still largely as shocked as Gawain is by the revelation of Bertilak's identity precisely because, like Gawain, they never expected an apparent rest-stop to be the actual end point of his quest/journey (even without knowledge of the chivalric convention

³⁴ 'Metaphor is, in a significant way, constitutive of all event-structure concepts. Moreover, we reason about events and causes using these metaphors. In addition, these metaphors emerge from everyday bodily experience. Patterns of body-based inference are the source of abstract inference patterns characterizing how we reason using such event-structure concepts'. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy* (p. 171).

³⁵ These Langlandian changes seem to conform to the 'Event-Structure metaphor' described by Johnson and Lakoff: 'States Are Locations (interiors of bounded regions in space); Changes Are Movements (into or out of bounded regions); Causes are Forces; Causation is Forced Movement' (p. 186).

³⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy*, p. 179.

of the hospitable vavasour). Moreover, characters can reveal themselves to us specifically through the mannerisms they employ while journeying. An obviously rich source for this is *The Canterbury Tales*. In 'The Canon Yeoman's Prologue', we see the Canon riding – like Sir Thopas (CT 7.774) – 'as he were wood' (CT 8.576) towards what he sees as jovial company (until the sweat is coursing down him and his horse) and know we are encountering an ugly customer. In 'The Man of Law's Tale', Custance drifts in her boat for over eight years and so her passive reactions to events that unfold on shore are unsurprising.

So, we share the conventions and expectations found on physical journeys with those displayed in medieval texts and, in one case in *The Canterbury Tales*, we see the characteristics of travel used metaphorically to describe a character's more abstract behaviour. The Wife of Bath is repeatedly described, and describes herself, as a woman who wanders out of doors – who goes on pilgrimages, visits her 'gossyb' (CT 3.544), and watches mystery plays – and who rides an 'amblere' (CT 1.469, a pacing horse), her lively, absorbing, and engaging prologue is characterised by the Friar as 'a long preamble of a tale' (CT 3.831).³⁷ *Preamble*, like *amblere*, clearly derives from the Latin *ambulare*, 'to walk', and so the Wife is understood by the Friar as 'wanderynge' in her discourse as she does through town and on her easy horse on the pilgrimage

³⁷ In the 'General Prologue' the narrator remarks, of the Wife of Bath, that 'She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye' (CT 1.467), and describes her many pilgrimages (CT 1.465-66). In her Prologue she describes one 'March, Averill, and May' (CT 3.546) during which she would walk '[f]ro hous to hous' (CT 3.547) and go 'into the feeldes' (CT 3.549); she remembers going to vigils, processions, and pilgrimages, and going to see preaching, mystery plays, and marriages (CT 3.555-558).

route. Such wanderings meet with disfavour from her husbands until she upholds them as an expression of her autonomy.³⁸ Speaking and wandering, in wives, was viewed as unsavoury by some medieval authorities.³⁹ And so the Wife's two unfeminine behaviours are elided by her detractor as one becomes the metaphorical container for the other. And the Summoner, incredulous at the rudeness (and lack of discernment) shown in this, unlinks the two again as a way of telling the Friar to go his way: 'What spekestow of preambulacioun? | What! amble, or trotte, or pees, or go sit down!' (CT 3.837-38).⁴⁰

Wandering in the Middle Ages could evoke accusations of vagrancy,

³⁸ In her Prologue the Wife of Bath describes how being squired 'up and down' by an apprentice met with a husband's 'suspecioun' (CT 3.305); she describes how he compared her wanderings in new clothes to a cat walking about in beautiful fur (CT 348-354).

³⁹ See 'How the Good Wife Taught her Daughter' in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, ed. by George Shuffelton (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008): 'Go not as it were a gase [foolish person] | Fro house to house to seke the mase [idle diversion]' (ll. 61-62); 'If [...] | That he be wroth and angry be, | Loke thou mekly ansuer him' (ll. 35-37); 'Byde thou at home, my doughter dere' (l. 77). See also Felicity Riddy, 'Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text', *Speculum*, 71 (1996), 66-86, where she points out that this text is expressive of bourgeois desires relating to social advancement and civic fears concerning single women, so is not to be taken as indicative of actual feminine behaviour in middle-class medieval households. She notes that the earliest manuscript in which it appears is a trilingual friar's handbook, and therefore that it arises from 'a masculine and clerical culture' (p. 70), much like the books about women derided by the Wife of Bath. 'What the God Wyf' appears with a B-text of *Piers* in one early-fifteenth-century manuscript: San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 128. Langland also cares about wifely obedience (5.130-31), see Chapter 3.

⁴⁰ The merging of telling and going in *The Canterbury Tales* – where one is physically reliable and the other abstract – is underlined by the Summoner saying he will tell one or two tales of friars 'er I come to Sidyngborne' (CT 3.847); journey markers are also a marker of time, and so speech can be seen as contained within the time a journey takes – it provides a context to all the shifting temporalities of the stories. A certainty at once overturned by the Wife: 'I speke of manye hundred yeres ago' (CT 3.863).

madness, or aimlessness: all states Will accuses himself of inhabiting.⁴¹ Will's state of mind in the poem – searching, hoping, failing – is expressed metaphorically by his manner of travel. But because the poem takes place in the terrain of his mind, the metaphorical perimeters are set wider than in the neat expressions I have been discussing so far.⁴² The allegorical framework of the poem allows its understanding to unfold as an open and experientially full version of such curt expressions as 'he is directionless', where the person described is implicitly understood to be a traveller and his life a journey.⁴³ *Piers* opens the metaphorical field up by attempting to understand exactly what the journey would be like in the life of someone who is consistently seeking 'aftur the whyes'.

As a result, in *Piers*, a sense of travelling inflects almost every line of poetry. In it to read is almost to walk, as one steps in line with the *passūs*. Mary Clemente Davlin has called walking *Piers's* 'most common posture of devotion', a gesture echoed by Christ, who is depicted walking more than he is in any

⁴¹ For vagrancy see 20.3; for madness see 15.1; for aimlessness see 5.8-9. See 5.26-32 for Reason's accusations of the same. Langland also saw wandering as a form of release from sin and care, his 'lunatyk lollares' who might wander 'seluerles in a somur garnement' attract praise for living above worldly care. See Middleton, 'Vagrancy'; Derek Pearsall, 'Lunatyk Lollares' in *Piers Plowman*, *Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England*, ed. by Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1988), pp. 163-78. Wandering was also associated with sexual incontinence, see Isabel Davis, *Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 19-20.

⁴² See Raskolnikov, pp. 168-96.

⁴³ See Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy*, pp. 60-63 for popular metaphors of 'The purposeful life'.

other position.⁴⁴ But the most constant sense of a journey in the poem is that given by Will, who begins by telling us he '[w]ente forth in the world' (Pr.4) to hear wonders and from then on refers to an onward trajectory that makes us subtly aware of his spiritual progress. Journeying is his common state, sleeping and waking. In passus 5, where he slowly begins explaining the circumstances of his life we suddenly hear that he is moving as he talks: 'as Y cam by Conscience with Resoun Y mette | [...] Romyng in remembraunce' (5.6, 11) and when Will first meets Imaginatif and their opening accord leads them to start walking together this feels like a natural progression– "Ye, certes,' quod he, 'that is soth,' and shop hym to walke; | And Y aroes vp riht with that' (13.245-46) – an impression confirmed when Imaginatif says he has been following Will 'mo then fourty wynter' (14.3). In sleep when Will meets Thought he walks with him for 'thre dayes' with no thought of destination or purpose (10.113). the Feast of Patience opens more as a chance encounter than an arrival at a designated venue: variations of the verb *romen*, 'to wander about', are repeated in three forms in the scene's opening three lines (15.25-7). This is all characteristic of the poem's sense of a constant walking pace underlying every expressed thought, all reported conversation. It moves with the rhythms of many feet.

⁴⁴ See Mary Clemente Davlin, 'Postures'. Davlin calls it a 'peripatetic poem' (p. 162). She emphasises the importance of different bodily postures for medieval prayer, interrogating how the body could influence thought in this way – but she does not describe how such an understanding could rely on deeply held cultural metaphor. Walking in the poem has been understood as shifting from the aimless to the purposeful, but Davlin claims it remains a deeply ambivalent act. Davlin counts 18 passages in which Christ is described as walking, voyaging, or just coming in (pp. 170-71).

Throughout the poem when a strong, long, or very active vision has closed this rhythm becomes disjointed, haphazard, or lost. Cogitation following visions is enabled by movement and the two unite in rambling as when Will wakes from the vision of the pardon and watches the sun set only to walk on aimlessly, for a mile, while he thinks about the dream (9.293-97). Such moments are characterised by extraneous reported details – such as when he tells us what he is wearing⁴⁵ – as though Will allows his sense of place to pervade his experience, infecting and influencing his thoughts, leading him astray:

I wente forth wyde-whare, walkyng myn one
 By a wide wilderness and by a wode-syde.
 Blisse of the briddes abyde me made
 And vnder lynde vpon a launde lened Y a stounde
 To lythen here layes and here louely notes. (10.61-65)

Such purposeless musings tussle with tough onward movement in a patchwork of journeying styles. In the later passus, the contrast between the forward trajectories of the visions and the lost goings of their dreamer heightens. After stepping out and talking with Imaginatif for over two-hundred lines, Will's companion simply vanishes (14.217), leaving him with an unequivocal message of contempt. This disregard plunges him once more into beggarly wanderings on waking, 'witteles ner-hande' (15.1). He wakes from the vision of Jesus's life because of the noise in the garden of Gethsemane (18.178), losing *Liberum Arbitrium* (for whom he eagerly searches 18.180), then meets with Faith (18.181-2): passing from one companion to another. After his long discourse with the busy Samaritan ends when his new friend rides off (of which more,

⁴⁵ Wool (Pr.2), red (10.1-5), bad shoes (20.1). See Chapter 2.

below), Will wakes and descends into watery wallowings going forth: 'as a recheles renk that recheth nat of sorwe | And yede forth ylike a lorel al my lyf-tyme' (20.2-3). Finally, on waking from the vision of the Barn of Unity, he goes 'by the way [...] | Heuy-chered' (22.1-2) because he does not know where to find food. In each case going on ('forth can Y walken' 15.2, 'wente Y forth' 20.1, 'yede forth' 20.3, 'Y yede', 22.2) is Will's only motion, signalling a life given over entirely to the act of searching. The violence of his dreaming merges with his life, and one has a sense that with such questions and knowledge the only possible act for him is the relentless one of stepping, of going on to find the next answer until walking is the only action possible. At the end of the poem, the container and meaning of the metaphor coincide in Conscience's exit. We never hear what Will does in life after he is awakened by the noise of Conscience's crying out, but the image of walking suggests itself to the reader. We put down the book and use our own bodies to seek. This is not closure. In each case it is in having bodies that move that we are able to understand the state of Will's mind – and the wider state of the poem's sense of vision, progress and, ultimately, its moving onward.

Moments of travelling encompass hope, excitement, the possibility of achievement, and those of stasis express frustration, hurt desire, and amorality.⁴⁶ People who pause seem at once to be entering states of confusion,

⁴⁶ Meed's riotous entry to Westminster is one example where travelling *per se* is not a good thing. It expresses the hopeful expectation of progress from wrongdoers (2.174-206) and act as a burlesque inversion of other, better journeys such as the search for Truth – which itself morphs from the outpouring of a rabble (7.159) into structured mapping (7.206-55) then stasis in the field (see Chapter 3).

or worse. Glutton's sense of journeying up to confession – 'Now bygynneth Glotoun for to go to shryfte' (6.350) – allows the whole scene to morph as the break in his journey makes him show us his capability to sin and literally interrupt his spiritual progress. He leaves the high road and enters an enclosed space devoted to company, ribaldry, and consumption. He sins in a space repeatedly undermined in the poem: the architectural interior.⁴⁷ Ranging from the halls of the rich, to pews, bowers, the dining-room, or the isolated table where the Doctour of Divinity sits, these places signal dark, dirty things, places where the good are kept out and the greedy, self-serving, and gross are allowed to stew in their own juices.⁴⁸ Glutton's tavern is soon filled with the odours of his excess, leading us to crave fresh air and movement again (6.400, 412); *Activa Vita* talks about people being paid to fart in the halls of the rich (15.204-5); and it is strongly suggested that the results of the 'penaunce' the doctor will have in his 'foul paunche' will be just as repellant (15.50a). Even Piers has 'manged ouer-muche', letting 'sire Sorfeet' sit at his 'borde' (8.270, 275), and this has made him and his family (disgustingly) ill. In these spaces, Study explains, the rich feast to 'dreuele at the deyes the deite to knowe | And gnawen god with gorge when

⁴⁷ See Kari Kalve, "'Truthe is therinne': The Spaces of Truth and Community in *Piers Plowman* B", in *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narrative*, ed. by Laura L. Howes (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), pp. 141–54, for a discussion of the poem's dislike of interior places.

⁴⁸ Wrath sits 'Yparroked in pues' (6.144), an enclosing sign of his catty need for privacy. Meed is, taken round the 'myddel' by a clerk into her 'boure' (3.10-11). In the B text, Study's attack on the rooms of the wealthy is more comprehensive. She says:

Now hath ech riche a rule – to eten by hymselfe
In a pryvee parlour for povere mennes sake,
Or in a chambre with a chymenee, and leve the chief halle
That was maad for meles, men to eten inne. (B.10.98-102)

here gottes fullen' (11.34, 38-39).⁴⁹ The poor, of course, are kept out (11.40-42).

When Patience leaves his feast, making sure he has 'in his poke vitayles' (15.185)

we are given an image of the only right way to eat: while walking, and we soon learn his food is, indeed, spiritual (15.247).

All this gives us a sense that the poem would rather we were outside, in whatever state of confusion that brings, than in the interior of a dark room, skulking, hiding, eating and pontificating. Though the dreamer's journeys lead frequently to loss and anger, or just to wondering ambling, these are processes that lead on – and so always bear the potential for transformation and hope.⁵⁰ The ending, of course, inhabits this space of wandering and searching. Leaving the Barn it is clear that its interior, though built with such excellent materials, is just like the others – cooping people into a space where their energies lead them to wrong.⁵¹

In counterpoint to all these unhappy earthly interiors the one safe and blessed interior space in the poem is Heaven. In walking through its gate into the feast inside, we find a final end to a journey that promises all the things we were spurred on to hope for. *Liberum Arbitrium* describes his fond welcome, saying he is:

in Cristes court yknowe wel and of his kynne a party.
Is nother Peter the porter ne Poul with the fauchen
That wol defende me heuene dore, dyng Y neuere so late.

⁴⁹ They 'tellen of the trinite how two slowe the thridde' (11.35) – a shocking line that contrasts starkly with the Samaritan's understanding. The Samaritan, of course, is a quick rider.

⁵⁰ Compare this to the freshness of the Lunatyk Lollares, or the poor described by Patience, who suffer in the open for gluttony, and so do not practice it (16.71-77), see Introduction.

⁵¹ See White, p. 114. See Chapter 3.

At mydnyhte, at mydday, my vois is so yknowe
 That vch a creature that loueth Crist wlecometh me faire. (16.168-72)

Such happy warmth from those inside the door signals that in Heaven the uncomfortable and wrong customs insisted on by the cooped-up rich have dissolved.⁵² So, unlike the unfair seating that so riles Will at Patience's feast – '[t]he maister was maed sitte furste as for the most worthy; | [...] Pacience and Y [...] | seten by ouresulue at a syde-table' (15.38, 40-41) – in heaven the purest sit 'with the souereyns in halle' (14.139) while one who did wrong in life is '[b]ote as a beggare bordles [...] on the grounde' (14.140-41). In Heaven and Hell worldly injustices are inverted. Dives becomes 'a beggare of helle' (15.300), a wanderer 'in langour and defaute' (15.294) while the poor take their proper place at the high table. The close of all wanderings, therefore, is a blessed interior. But the poem makes us fully aware that in life we should roam far and wide to get there.

Langland appeals to what his reader knows of moving to spur her on through the ideas that unfold in his text. While those ideas might be read as discursively incoherent, the strong undercurrent of bodily feeling in the poem enables comprehension.⁵³ This is precisely how Langland understands the experience of embodiment, it is the material that carries understanding and meaning into the world. His allegory moves boldly through gestures and steps to enable the reader's cogitation.

⁵² This warm welcome brings Gawain's arrival at *Hautdesert* to mind.

⁵³ For discursive incoherence see Carruthers, *Search*; Jenkins; Spearing, *Readings*; Griffiths; Kasten; Raabe (for a counter-argument).

Journeying To Hell

Travelling permeates the text and in it we are given a constant sense of bodily orientation, in all its complexity, as a master metaphor for states of mind and achievement. This reaches its height in *passūs* 18-19. In previous passages journeying has displayed a fluctuating, uncertain character that has reflected the complications of the dreamer's search. Here, the movement of characters across the page is assured and quick. This moment of excitement leads to the poem's greatest revelation: the incarnation. As explored in Chapter 1, the incarnation is the poem's template for personificational embodiment. It is a moment in which human bodies are elevated through their association with the divine, and the site at which meaning can be viewed as entering the physical in an exemplary fashion. However, there are elements of the incarnation that evade bodily comprehension. This chapter ends with a discussion of the disembodied Christ that appears within the poem's strong and urgent sense of moving. Up to this point the poem displays ways in which readers can only understand its ideas through their bodies. At the moment of its greatest mystery it whisks that body away to show, in contrast, what is finally beyond it: the mystery of God outside human form. In the last instant, the body articulates faith by stepping away from it.

In an amplification of the shock of mystery that arrives when Christ puts off human form, the journeys pursued by the poem up to this point achieve a stunning speed and urgency. The sense of an imminent arrival at a defining

telos begins with *Liberum Arbitrium* leading Will 'forth with tales | Til we cam into a contre, *Cor-hominis* hit heihte' (18.3-4), where both see the Tree of Charity. In contrast to other allegorically named places – that we learn of through maps anticipating a route (the ways to Truth and Clergie) – there is no pause to define and explore the means of this journey; instead it is taken immediately and only revealed briefly once achieved. There is no preamble; this journey is quick and decisive. The devil exits the stage in a similar attitude with the fruit he has stolen – 'the deuel was wel redy | [...] And baer hem forth baldly' (18.110, 114) – and this instigates the rousing events that immediately follow. The incarnation occurs with a speed emphasised by its temporal terms 'Thenne' (18.117), 'And thenne' (18.123), and the extraordinary imagery that sees Free Will seize the middle prop of the tree (the Son) and Mary hear at once that she must house Jesus 'Til *plenitudo temporis*' (18.126), or (more prosaically) for 'fourty wokes' (18.133) in her womb. This time passes instantaneously – there is no space for pause in these lines.⁵⁴

But the action really picks up speed with the introduction of the trio of Faith, *Spes* and the Samaritan, who create a break in the Biblical narrative to display to the dreamer the change to come. Faith and *Spes* do not understand what is about to happen, they cannot explain the Trinity fully (as I explore above). But they seem as keen to travel directly towards the new dispensation as the Samaritan – the dreamer first sees *Spes* 'Rappliche renne the riht way we wente' (18.289) – and in their speed they engineer their own downfall. When the

⁵⁴ For the temporality of this passage see Cervone, *Poetics*, pp. 130-32.

two patriarchs see the wounded man the Samaritan is about to save, they both accelerate as a way of avoiding him, 'Faith [...] fleyh asyde' (19.59), 'Hope cam huppynge aftur' (19.61); an act the dreamer summarises: 'they bothe | [...] flowe fram the man ywounded' (19.81-82). The Samaritan is no less fast, entering the poem 'sittyng on a muyle, | Rydyng ful raply the riht way we yeden' (19.49-50), but he is able to pause to help without losing his sense of urgency. After providing for the injured man, he says:

'Y may nat lette,' [...] and lyard he bystrideth
And rapede hym to ryde the rihte way to Ierusalem.
Bothe Fayth and his felawe *Spes* folewede faste aftur. (19.78-80)

Likewise, the Samaritan pauses to invest fully in the important task of explaining the Trinity to the dreamer, but when he has finished he realises the time he has lost with consternation: "'Y may no lengore lette,' quod he, and lyard a prikede | And wente away as wynd' (19.335-36). All these journeys accumulate and give the sense of a wild movement forward – an inevitable pull being exercised on the agents of the text to arrive in the next passus and the extraordinary events they will witness there.

The major event of this passus is Jesus's joust. Repeated references to this meeting indicate a fighting charge that will end these eager flights. Faith is 'an heraud of armes' carrying the badge of the Trinity (18.185-87), *Spes* is a scout enquiring after a knight (19.1). The Holy Spirit via Gabriel has told Mary that 'Iesus sholde iouste [...] and by iugement of armes | Who sholde fecche the fruyt, the fende or Jesus suluen' (18.128-29) and we know Jesus is waiting to fight with the devil (18.136). So when he enters the poem, in the guise of the

Samaritan and Piers, 'sprakeliche | As is the kynde of a knyhte that cometh to be dobbet' (20.10-11) we are unsurprised that he is impatient for combat, and the adverb 'sprakeliche' ('sprightly, lively,; 'eager and brisk') delineates not just how he is riding but how we feel as readers, eagerly awaiting the denouement of so much energetic verse. As a human speeding towards his sacrificial death, Jesus gives readers a pervasive sense of how his body relates to his humanity and to his divine purpose. This last journey imbibes physical reading with a holy purpose as readers' bodies are the first point of reference for an understanding of how Jesus sped towards the crucifixion: the telos of an eager journey. The divine is fully embodied here and the text reaches a profound expression of how people are united in the body with Christ.

Fusing with the Samaritan, and Piers, Jesus brings all of their separate wanderings to an end (and the human wandering they represent), and it looks as though the poem is gearing up for a decisive allegorical battle in which its uncertainties will be quashed and its images unified. But, as John Burrow writes: 'the joust between Jesus and Satan, the expected climax of the action, simply never takes place'.⁵⁵ The battle does not occur. Instead of wanting to see him fight the devil the actual spectators to the battle call for Jesus's crucifixion, themselves cancelling the combat they came to see (20.38). In the desperate imposition of passivity that follows exists not only the loss of life, but the removal and transference of all the kinetic energy generated by the poem thus

⁵⁵ Burrow, 'Action', p. 266. Objections that Burrow later quashes, when describing the dream-like nature of the narrative Langland weaves.

far. When Jesus is dead and Longinus is bought in with his 'kene spere' (20.80) to joust, a martial resolution, however bizarre, has been reached – but instead 'the blynde bete the dede' (20.98). We see a victory no-one but Faith actually perceives, when he berates the Jews present, pointing to Longinus's conversion: 'youre chaumpioun chiualer, chief knyght of yow alle, | Yelde hym recreaunt remyng, riht at Iesu wille' (20.102-3). This snaking subversion of the resounding triumph expected into a bizarre spectacle of cruelty makes the paradox of Jesus's passive victory freshly present.⁵⁶

In this stopping-short, with no cathartic release, a sense of intense loss arises that covers over the allegorical acrobatics in which Jesus's fight with death is becoming far more complex. The denial of release in the traditional victory of the field partly makes the action of the crucifixion confusing, and partly gives the reader a fresh the sense that God would never seek victory in such triumphal or bland human terms. Langland traduces his own allegorical frame, and halts the momentum of his poetry, for a much harder-won idea. He brings his reader up short so that she can feel, again, the shock of Jesus's passivity – seeing him ride like the wind into a place of humiliation and despair in order to achieve a victory over death that is near-invisible. This works directly on the sense we have had so far of keen travelling. In the build up of

⁵⁶ This paradox is very present to Langland's poetic thought. As Pearsall says: 'For Langland, Christ is Pantocrator, lord of life and conquerer of death', C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 50. Davlin says (with reference to the Four Daughters' description) 'Christ's posture is not only that of an immobile victim but also and at the same time that of a victorious warrior-rescuer [...] contradictions of immobility and motion come together on the Cross, the sign of contradiction, where Christ, in the Johannine tradition, is at his weakest and strongest' ('Postures' pp. 172-73). See also, Aers, 'Christ's Humanity'.

speed, the poem has worked on our ideas of what running towards an ending means. This is experiential and physical because of the way Langland repeatedly makes the reader aware of the need to get on. I think he brings his reader to a physical edge and then ruthlessly denies her the satisfaction of seeing her excitement fulfilled.⁵⁷

Moreover, this is a characteristically Langlandian journey. It is his most important travelling archetype: that the destination we think we are travelling towards is actually quite unlike the one we might eventually find. In the poem, as we will find out, even the most keenly-sought places are evasive and strange. Langland's two most sure-footed depictions of this both occur in passus 20. He makes it clear that human journeys are not reflected in divine ones – which are strange and circuitous – and therefore reinforces the idea that human knowledge, grounded in embodiment, can achieve beautiful thought but cannot approach divine knowledge, however much it shares embodiment with Christ. The best journeys, he suggests, are not ones with endings. While we are fundamentally embodied, there is one place humans cannot go.

When he descends into Hell, Christ has been transformed from a man

⁵⁷ For a detailed discussion of endings in literature that explores the ways humans see narratives of closure in temporal continuity see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 'Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst,' *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems' (p. 7). He writes that endings satisfy our sense of insignificance as they connect us to grander temporalities, writing that in novels: 'We cannot, of course, be denied an end; it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end' (p. 23), *Piers* sits oddly with this argument as, while it obviously physically ends, it stops without meaning to in a way that encourages us to go on.

into a soul 'sylinge' (20.341) forwards in an effervescent cloud of light.⁵⁸ This is a subtle arrival.⁵⁹ Unlike other journeys in the poem it is not a walking or a quick running but the invasion of God as a substance: light.⁶⁰ Having evaded death through sleight of hand Christ now slips into Hell in a way that baffles everyone present. As the most important journey depicted in the poem it breaks down the conventions of journeying used up to now. This voyage overturns its

⁵⁸ The two sections of the N-Town 'Harrowing of Hell' carefully distinguish between the Anima Christi that appears in Hell, and Jhesus who appears at the Resurrection. See 'Play 33: The Harrowing of Hell', in *The N-Town Plays*, ed. by Douglas Sugano (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), note to line 1. Langland is sensitive to this idea, but by no means faithful to it in his depiction. Jesus does not arrive simply as his soul, though this is one aspect of his depiction covered in *Piers*.

⁵⁹ Similarly subtle is the journey of the dreamer, who slips downward in his sleepy vision 'Y withdrow in that derkenesse to *descendit ad inferna*' (20.14). This ability to think and dream of Hell comes of a long tradition, see Eileen Gardiner, *Medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland, 1993), vv-xxxiv, for other visions, though not Langland's. This description also gives the impression of a place (London, according to passus 5) where Hell and the afterlife, even in the most monumental moments, are very close to ordinary people. *St. Erkenwald* is an example of this same porousness, as the pagan's (feminine) soul ascends at the very same moment his body is saved by Erkenwald's tear as though in a parallel space that is hidden but synchronous to the London building site where the witnesses are standing. See, *St Erkenwald* in *A Book of Middle English*, eds J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), ll. 333-38. The arrival of the pagan's soul in heaven is seen, as it is in Langland, as an arrival at a banquet, where Hell has, somewhat prosaically, been imagined as a place with no supper:

My soule may sitte þer in sorow and sike ful colde;
 Dymly in þat derke dethe þer dawes neuer morowen,
 Hungrie inwith helle-hole, and herken after meeles
 Longe er ho þat soper se oþir segge hyr to lathe. (ll. 305-308)

This, of course, mirrors the history of Trajan, whose breaking out of Hell indicates Hell's closeness to the plane of Langland's dreaming. The influence of mystery plays on Langland's writing here leads me to wonder whether such an immediate physical experience with Hell on a street corner could have given writers the impression of its intimate accessibility in a civic space, and so inspired Langland and the *Erkenwald* poet to imagine its sudden appearance in their midst? If so, this would appear to be a unique aspect of medieval experience that cannot be conveyed in metaphors of movement and place.

⁶⁰ The journey is viewed from the perspective of the perplexed Daughters of God, who converge outside Hell from different compass points and with different styles of coming: Mercy 'walkynge in the way' from the West, Truth 'softly walkynge' or 'wendynge' from the East, Justice 'rennyng' from the North, and Peace 'pleiynge' – skipping along – from the South. Each style denotes a different way of approaching the debate about salvation. Justice, running, is harried and is self-important; wandering Mercy is mild and humble and ready to agree with Peace, who is dressed 'gaily' in patience, joyful with Love (her lover's) news; Truth is soft but sure.

image of death as a journey on foot, and unravels the very humanly embodied sense of travelling relied on so far (walking or riding) in order to depict Christ going as a shower of light.⁶¹ Having appealed to and used our sense of walking in our bodies to create metaphors, the poem now shows us how an experience with the divine (even one that has been embodied) has nothing to do with how we feel and go as humans.

Instead of walking onto the scene like he does in the mystery plays that have clearly influenced the reworking of this passage in the C text, Jesus enters the scene as a light that fills the scene and simply is.⁶² The light lingers over Hell throughout the passus, emanating while the frantic demons within it scurry and debate its meaning. We know the light is the deity because it identifies itself as such, speaking first as 'A vois loude in that liht' (20.271), then simply as light ('efte that lihte bade vnlouke,' 20.359), it says it is 'The lord of myhte and of mayne that made alle thynges' (20.361).⁶³ And so provides an image of a God that does not travel and move things, but that is immanent and declares himself when needed.

⁶¹ Death is repeatedly understood as a journey in *Piers*. Will *passes* on into 'elde' (12.12), we *pass* through purgatory (9.11), and 'go hennes' (9.349) following '[t]he hey way to heuene-ward' (hopefully, 16.33).

⁶² *English Mystery Plays*, ed. by Peter Happé (London: Penguin, 1985), ll. 21-22 p. 553, see also ll. 97-180 and *Piers* 20.274-358. Pearsall suggests Langland saw such a performance while in the process of writing, C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 281, and it is hard to disagree with this image of a writer influenced by his wanderings about town, Peter Happé also notes the similarity (p. 552). Both the York and Towneley Harrowing have devils using the glorious line 'dynge that dastard doune' (York, 180) in relation to Christ. It's a shame Langland didn't choose to repeat it. See 'The Deliverance of Souls' in *The Towneley Plays*, ed. by A. C. Cawley and M. Stevens, EETS s.s. 13 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) ll. 183, 219.

⁶³ This follows Nicodemus, but with the alteration that the voice is associated both with the light and with God.

In the York Cycle's 'Harrowing of Hell' the light is a message to those in Hell of the arrival of Christ, early on Jesus promises: 'A light I woll thei have | To schewe thame I schall come sone'.⁶⁴ In Nicodemus the light is more closely related to God, as those living in Hell rejoice, saying: 'This light is the beginning (author) of everlasting light which did promise to send unto us his co-eternal light' (18:1). But in both sources, while the light is a precursor and context for the arrival of Christ as a man, it is never identified as speaking, saying it is God, or as having agency in the escape of souls from Hell. All of these occur in the harrowing as imagined by Langland. He creates an image of a slippery, diffuse, and formless arrival adapted from sources in which Christ comes in as any human would. The significant difference between any play text and this depiction is the characterisation of Christ. On stage, of course, an actor cannot embody light and so he walks on as a man. In *Piers*, he slips forward as light. Gobelyne characterizes Christ when living as God crossing the earth: 'god bigiled vs alle in goynge of a weye' (20.327), but in Hell there is no sense of this bounded movement. Christ just is, '[w]ith glorie and with grete liht' (20.342).

Meanwhile, everyone in the scene fails to see the complex non-materiality of this arrival. Instead of seeing the abstract and ineffably powerful figure of the Trinity as the free-flowing and formless thing it is, each onlooker returns it, in their own way, to a metaphorical container based on their physical

⁶⁴ The Towneley Cycle's depiction is similar: 'Som tokyn will I send before, | with myrth to gar thare gammes begyn. | A light I will thay haue | To know I will com sone', ll. 19-22, p. 293.

experience.⁶⁵ The devils imagine several physically-bounded ways Christ could be arriving as an obvious means of establishing how they could conduct a counter-attack. They prepare for Jesus as a knight still riding fast on a horse, only this time at the head of a great army or a cavalry (20.292-94) that they can repulse with '[b]rumstoen', 'brasene gonnes', 'crokes', 'kalketrappes' and a 'mangel'.⁶⁶ Even when they acknowledge God is all around them as inchoate light, they think about it as a discrete thing and seem to think they can block Hell up against it by filling all its windows and chinks (20.283-286).⁶⁷ Lucifer locates the light as acting physically in time, 'Such a light ayenes oure leue Lazar hit fette' (20.275), implying he thinks it has some means of fetching, and a physicality that makes its actions temporally separable, before finally acknowledging the lessons of his past: 'Bothe this lord and this lihte, ys longe ygo Y knewe hym. | [...] where he wol is his way' (20.296, 298).

It is not just the inhabitants of Hell who have trouble grasping the disembodied activeness of God and so give him metaphorically human means of action. The Four Daughters of God apply similarly embodied verbs to the light's abilities, saying it will 'lepe', 'vnlouke' and 'lede' souls from Hell and

⁶⁵ The image of the powerful light (full of agency) fuses with the idea of Jesus's resurrected glory in Langland's treatment as a further way of elucidating the incomprehensibility of what is about to happen. When Truth and Justice scoff at the message of Mercy and Peace (Truth calls Mercy's story 'a tale of walterot' 20.145 – Langland has a seemingly endless store of derisive phrases – Justice asks Peace if she is mad, 20.193-94) they are not only rejecting the idea that the souls of the dead can be saved from Hell, but that such is achievable by light itself.

⁶⁶ See C text, ed. Pearsall, note to lines 292 and 294, where Pearsall discusses Satan's 'incurably literal way of thinking.'

⁶⁷ Hell is imagined in homely terms, with loop-holes and 'louvers': 'a lantern-like turret in the roof of a hall to let smoke out and light in.' C text, ed. Pearsall, note to line 286.

'hem alofte brynge'.⁶⁸ Their idea of the harrowing appears to be lifted from iconography. But when it comes the exodus from Hell is described simply as a kind of glowing flow enabled by love and the light: 'tho that our lord louede forth with that liht flowed' (20.369). And so, rather than 'implying a posture used in many Harrowing of Hell scenes in visual art were Christ's hand grasps the hand or arm of Adam to pull him forcibly out of Hell' we see Langland defying iconographic convention by showing the harrowing as a flying forth where the power of God is signified in an entirely non-human way. There is no pulling, the gates of Hell simply break with a 'breth' from the light (20.364).⁶⁹ The light's power is to act without form or gesture, to travel without movement. All these attributions of power to the light (however groundless) are absent from the sources, where it is evident Jesus enters within the the light and pulls people from Hell using his human limbs.⁷⁰ In adapting his sources in this way, the scene builds on the strange movements of the crucifixion, showing God (literally) moving in ways that are mysterious to others.

Book says in his excitement about what is to come: 'For Iesus as a geaunt

⁶⁸ ll. 286, 194, 280, 275, 148.

⁶⁹ Davlin refers to these verbs as evidence of Jesus's paradoxical strength, but they are not borne out by the action that follows (p. 173).

⁷⁰ In Nicodemus we see Christ 'stretching forth his hand' (24:1), 'holding the right hand of Adam' (24:1). The importance of these limbs is emphasised by David, who sings: 'His right hand hath wrought salvation for him and his holy arm' (24:2). In the York Harrowing, Jesus leaves it to the angel Michael to lead the souls from Hell, but gives his commands and good wishes in physically specific terms: 'come forth with me'; lede thame'; 'I schall be with youe wher ye wende' (ll. 385, 391, 402). Michael answers in the same style: 'Lord, wende we schall aftir thi sawe' (l. 397). In the contemporary *St. Erkenwald*, the pagan's sad story of being left behind from the Harrowing sees an indifferent Christ physically pull the beloved from Hell: 'Quen þou herghedes helle-hole and hentes hom þeroute, | Þi loffyng oute of limbo, þou laftes me þer' (ll. 291-92).

with a gyn cometh yende | To breke and to bete adoun all that ben agaynes hym' (20.261-62), showing the usual necessity for text to use very human metaphors to signify the unreal and incomprehensible. He evokes the same cast-off metaphor as the *passūs* that see Christ travelling eagerly as a knight, only this time amplified to reveal through inference the overwhelming finality of this action: this will be a great battle! But when it comes and a glow and breath break Hell we have revealed to us in our disappointment the absurdity of the idea that such a mystery could be contained by analogy. In disappointing our human sense of getting on, our idea of ourselves as journeying through life – and finally into death (with 'a pak at [our] rugge' 16.54) – we see how impossible it would be to think of Christ in the same terms, who is here defying death.

In the final moments of the harrowing, Christ reverses the lessons of the incomprehensible light to gloriously declare himself: '[I]o! Me here [...] lyf and soule bothe' (20.370) and jostle with the devil about his right to remove the souls of the damned (see Chapter 2). The purpose of the light has been achieved in the flowing forth of the souls and Lucifer has been blinded by the sight (20.368). The glorious, blinding mystery suddenly gives way to the sight of an embodied Christ as the light fades enough for Lucifer to be able to look and see the embodied man that accompanies these mysteries. Returning to the body before Christ begins to explain the mysteries of incarnation, Langland's scene outlines what it is that emerges in human form through pushing his readers via the incomprehensible back into the physical.

The metaphor of journeying is not over, though, in the poem. Just as journeys are constantly frustrated – even divine ones, to the good – journeying, in its compromised complexity, remains the poem's favourite mode. After the heights of this vision in which we see the Trinity through human eyes acting non-humanly, explanation of Christ returns to prior metaphors. The dreamer calls him 'Iesus the ioustare' (21.10) and Conscience describes 'Peres armes l [...] and his cote armure' as well as calling Christ 'conqueror of cristene' (21.12-13). He uses this as a basis for another figurative description of the Trinity (21.26-33), and rewrites Christ's death according to comprehensible human metaphor:

And tho conquerede he on cros as conquerour noble;
 Myhte no deth hym fordo ne adown brynge
 That he ne aroos and regnede and raueschede helle. (21.50-52)

Showing how the images of the previous passus are too mysterious to be understood alone: they must be returned to metaphors that allow people with bodies to understand what just happened.

And, after the pitched battle of the final passus, in which travelling precisely takes on the form of attack so subtly undercut by Christ, Conscience exits the poem on a journey that leads off the page. The final stuffy interior, built with so much hope, places the poem beyond the limits it can achieve and into its most frustrated going of all. This travelling on is intensely human in its acceptance of poetic failure and its evocation of a movement we can all know and share. Once we have finished reading, it leaves us with an interpellation (Conscience's to Grace) that hints at something beyond the page and asks us to

walk 'as wyde as the world renneth' (22.381) in search of it.⁷¹ We know the search it suggests is metaphoric, but in its appeal to our physical knowledge of ourselves it enables a hope founded in the body. This is a fragile hope, as Langland has shown us all journeys will be circuitous and frustrating in reality, but it is one that urges us ever on and on.

Conclusion

In *Piers*, Langland presents his readers with a poem that sees the world as radically allegorical: a space in which bodies give rise to meanings. It is impossible even to think in the poem without this process being imagined as walking with other bodies through maps of thought. Langland understands that it is impossible for humans to imagine the world non-allegorically as we cannot leave our bodies – and he is ultimately beautifully cognisant of the fact that we need allegory in order to think because we think through our physicality. Though the incarnation provides an allegorical way of thinking about God (remember Thomas's touch) Langland reminds his readers that it also partakes in something utterly mysterious and outside the capabilities of human thought to understand. In order to perceive this aspect of the

⁷¹ See Mary Clemente Davlin, *A Journey into Love: Meditating with the Medieval Poem 'Piers Plowman'* (Los Angeles: Marymount Institute Press, 2008), for an exploration of what forms an explicitly Christian use of this message might take – all framed in another journey metaphor. I do not think such uses are confined to the religious, as Langland's poem is capable of eliciting numerous responses. Among them a sense of urgency relating to our treatment of the poor and our responsibilities in the natural world and towards each other in society, as well as a sudden awareness of the possibilities for self deceit, and a desperation regarding our lack of understanding of our place in the world. All are ideas I think the poem leaves with us not in conclusion, but urgency.

incarnation in such a deeply embodied poem, readers need to learn what it is not to have form and the text can only point to this by increasing our awareness of Christ's human physicality and then radically undercutting it to indicate something at the very edge of the physical.

Bodies move in the poem in all sorts of guises and contortions – dancing, running, leading its readers through the book by appealing to their sense of their bodies and the ways daily physical experiences can be glossed as meaningful. This provides figures for thought and ways of understanding the most abstract mysteries as first discoverable in our innately physical beings.

Conclusion

Embodiment and allegory are fully engaged with one another in *Piers Plowman*. The manner in which Langland describes and presents bodies in his poem suggests a poet deeply engaged with the physical processes of life. People in *Piers* perform a vast number of embodied actions: stances, feelings, gestures, biological processes. However, Langland does not leave his insights into bodily experience on the surface of his text, in neat descriptive passages. Although he represents the body in his poem with startling accuracy, he goes further and embroils his allegory in the chaotic world of embodiment in order to talk about the relationship of the body to language. He strives to show how embodiment interacts with words, ideas, and the writing of texts through the way he teases apart his allegory. Langland sees the material and the conceptual separately, in an intense and complex dialogue. He is able to bring his reader into deeper understanding of how words, ideas, concepts and bodies collide.

The incarnation in *Piers* forms a cornerstone through for its overt approbation of the bodily. What finally emerges from the poem is a sense of something discoverable just beyond the limits of embodied experience. It is in understanding our bodies that we reach that edge, but Langland pushes his reader – in his inconclusive ending – back to what is physical (and not textual) to try to discover it.

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